

**Report on Review of Foster Carers Uplift  
York City Council**

**1.0 Background**

- 1.1 In January 2019, a decision was made by York City Council to remove the alignment of the annual Foster Carer fee uplift with the annual salary uplift for social work staff. This decision resulted in the removal of the Foster Care fee uplift 2018/19. The Council informed carers that the resources saved would be reinvested into new training. YAFCA made representations to the Director of Children's Services (Appendix 2) and it was agreed that this decision would be suspended and a review would be undertaken.
- 1.2 I was commissioned to undertake this review in July 2019 with a completion date by September 2019. Terms of Reference agreed between the Local Authority and YAFCA are attached as Appendix 1.
- 1.3 I am a qualified social worker and have over thirty years' experience working within Children and Adult Services in five local authorities both at social worker and senior manager level. As senior manager I have been responsible for a fostering service within a Local Authority. As an Independent Consultant, I currently chair three Fostering Panels as well as chairing two Safeguarding Partnerships.

**2.0 Methodology**

- 2.1 In undertaking this review, I have received papers from the Local Authority including information on training, current fees, numbers of carers and numbers of children Looked After by the Local Authority.
- 2.2 I have received papers from YAFCA including extracts from the relevant council committees which set out the fees and uplifts over a number of years.(Appendix 3)

- 2.3 I have looked at a range of other Local Authorities' fees and payments arrangements in addition to the Fostering Network information on fees paid across the country in 2017.
- 2.4 I have met with the managers of the service, the Assistant Director and the Director of Childrens Services.
- 2.5 I have met with representatives of YAFCA and held two drop-in sessions to consult with individual foster carers.
- 2.6 I have had telephone discussions with 25 foster carers. Ten carers' details were provided by the Local Authority and ten by YAFCA. All YAFCA committee members were contacted. The majority of foster carers who were consulted were at Advanced level and had been foster carers for a number of years.

### **3.0 Current context**

- 3.1 In 2013 the Director of Children's Services and YAFCA agreed the payment and fee arrangements for foster carers. The work undertaken between the council and YAFCA set out a whole range of payments that the council agreed to provide for carers in addition to structuring fees on four levels, based on the skills of foster carers. While I was not provided with any written information that uplifts would be in line with social workers pay increases, it is clear that this was the intention of the council. As a result some years, like social workers and indeed all council employees, foster carers did not receive any increases.
- 3.2 In 2013 the council had 125 foster carers available to care for Looked after Children in York. Since that date these numbers have decreased at a time when numbers of looked after children have risen. Currently, there are 102 fostering households and 227 Looked after Children and Young People. The vast majority of mainstream carers are at advanced level. Clearly, this places a pressure on the council to look for external placements through Independent Fostering Agencies to fill the gap in resources.
- 3.3 The council has only very recently recognised the need to increase the numbers of fostering households and additional resource have been allocated to implement a recruitment strategy. This is a positive development and recognises the challenges of recruiting suitable carers. Until then

there had been no budget for recruitment or marketing which is unusual in local authorities. The matter is urgent and it is of concern that there is delay in the assessment of potential carers are not assessed immediately. I am informed this is due to lack of capacity, nevertheless this delay may be more costly in the long run

- 3.4 This year a Placement Review has been undertaken which was implemented on September 1<sup>st</sup>. The Placement Review was outside the remit of this review, but it would be fair to note that to many of the foster carers consulted the uplift and the Placement Review are connected. As a consequence, some of the views collated make reference to concerns about the outcome of the Placement Review.

## **4.0 Findings**

- 4.1 The managers within the council are committed to improving the fostering service and increasing numbers of fostering households. Over the next twelve months it is expected that the Recruitment Strategy will be fully implemented.
- 4.2 While the council has a responsibility to make decisions on payments for foster carers and is working within a fixed budget, it is unfortunate that discussion of the fee uplift was not included in the consultation undertaken on the Placement Review. Foster carers were not expecting that the uplift would be removed and therefore YAFCA challenged the decision. An apology to foster carers was issued by the Director of children's Services in recognition that the decision regarding the uplift had not been well communicated. The Director did emphasise that the current fees paid to York foster carers were the most competitive in the country, particularly at advanced level. In addition the challenges of working within budget constraints was highlighted.
- 4.3 The overwhelming majority of foster carers consulted were very clear that they were disappointed in the council process followed both in making and communicating the decision. They believed that the new senior management team had not understood that an agreement was in place and it should have been honoured. They felt the decision had come out of the blue and there had been no warning that the uplift would not take place this year. Many stated they felt devalued and they were not being treated as part of a team with social workers and the fostering service. The views and

sentiments expressed in the letter from YAFCA to the Director of Children's Services were reiterated by many of those consulted.

4.4

The findings on the specific terms of reference are set out below:

**Outcome between fee uplift and placement stability :**

The performance of York Children's Services on placement stability is satisfactory at 10.96% at the time of writing. None of the foster carers consulted stated that the decision re the uplift affected their relationship with the child/children in placement. There was no suggestion that the decision on the uplift would

4.5 impact on the future stability of the placement.

**Outcome between fee uplift and foster care recruitment:**

As stated above it is of concern that numbers of mainstream carers are declining while at the same time and in line with national figures, numbers of children looked after by the council are increasing. It is recognised that potential carers apply to foster for a number of reasons but overwhelmingly when asked they state that they are seeking to make a difference to a child's life. It is unlikely that those making enquiries to foster have looked at financial information in detail prior to making an enquiry. At the same time sufficient remuneration is required given the work of foster carers. During the consultation foster carers frequently cited that this was a 24/7 role, and this should be recognised. Some described the impact on their lives and their homes when working with young people with complex needs.

It is difficult to make clear comparators on fees and allowances with other Local Authorities as it is not necessarily comparing like with like. On the information received and consultation undertaken the following conclusions have been drawn.

York city council weekly allowances are in line with Local Authority national figures and while concerns about the addition of the new delegated authority amount were raised by several foster carers no individual raised the weekly allowance as an issue.

The carers fees which would have been subject to the uplift raised comments. Some foster carers recognised that the highest level 3 (previously termed as advanced) was set at a good level. The Fostering Network's National Review of fees and allowances 2017/18 identified York City Council as the highest payer for this

level. (appendix 4) and in 2017/18 for a child aged 11-15 with the most complex needs a fee of £487.50 plus a weekly allowance of £159.04 provided an annual income of over £33000. The current payment now sits at a fee of £496.61 with a weekly allowance of £167.02, an annual income of over £34000. Looking at neighbouring local authorities and those further afield this would appear to be a competitive level of pay to recruit foster carers wishing to undertake care of children with the most complex needs.

Level one and two are not set at such competitive levels and there are significant financial differences between these two levels and level three in York. Some Local Authorities pay more at level one and two, for example North Yorkshire County Council pays £209.72 to the equivalent level 2 of York.

- 4.6 At the same time there is no consistency across local authorities on uplifts for foster carers and it has been a matter for local decision making; for example Hull City Council uses the RPI from the Office of Budget Responsibility to decide about uplifts, others such as Knowsley do not automatically provide an annual uplift. I was unable to find a local authority where a clear and explicit link had been made to social work pay increases.

#### **Outcome between fee uplift and foster care retention:**

- 4.7 The overwhelming majority of foster carers consulted stated they would continue to foster. Statements such as “making a difference”, rewarding to see children develop”, “they are part of our family,” were common. Some noted that given the current inflation level the lack of uplift represented a cut in income as making their job more difficult. This was also linked the new delegated authority payments which some said were insufficient. When asked about future plans less than five foster carers stated they were unsure if they will continue to foster and only three made a clear link that this was due to the perception that they were not being treated well by the council.

On the basis of this it is concluded that while no clear link can be made between the decision about the fee uplift and retention the perception that the foster carers consulted do not feel valued requires further consideration and is addressed in the recommendations.

#### **Outcome between fee uplift monies being redirected into foster care training :**

Training for foster carers must be provided by the council to ensure they can develop skills and feel confident in their daily care of children who have often experienced trauma, neglect and poor care in their early and formative years. The training provided by York City council for foster carers sits with the Workforce Development Unit which provides training across services including training for social workers. New training has been commissioned for this year in recognition that the offer was currently insufficient and to date an additional £10000 has been spent, largely on training for foster carers. The most notable new training delivered was Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Families, a course that is commonly delivered across local authorities to support foster carers and one which is generally highly valued by attendees. In York the course was subject to criticism by foster carers, those who raised concerns felt that the course leader was too rigid in presentation. The service has recognised these criticisms and sought to improve the quality of the course. With the exception of a very small number of foster carers consulted all were able to state the training that they had attended in the last year. The training provided by the NSPCC in partnership with the council was particularly valued.

Given there is not a separate budget for carer training many of the foster carers consulted felt that their uplift, as they saw it, was being used to pay for training for social workers. There were also complaints that social workers attended some of the courses but did not necessarily complete the full training.

The consultation on training identified very clear “us and them” views from foster carers. Many saw funding additional training as their budget being used for the benefit of others and also that there was no transparency in the decision to redirect funding. One foster carer advocated the development of a personal training budget for foster carers to use as they saw fit. A small number saw the benefit of the provision of additional training for all foster carers.

For the purpose of this review consultation on training and support took place in the widest sense which drew some useful comments. Most appreciated the Gateway events provided by the council, noting that it was a good opportunity to find out what was happening in fostering. The development of more support groups

such as one for those caring for younger children and one for connected carers would be helpful. In addition venues away from West Offices would be welcome.

Similarly, many found the support group for those caring for adolescents run by YAFCA helpful. This is a long established group and while valued by those who attended some consulted felt it was closed and needed to be more inclusive. Some suggestions were made to improve support, including holding meetings at different times as many could not attend in the evening including some council staff who had caring responsibilities. This would allow increased input from a wider range of experts.

The increased training and support will improve the offer for new foster carers once recruited and nationally foster carers recognise and value access to good quality training and support.

### **Conclusion:**

A new senior management team has been relatively recently established and faces a number of challenges to rapidly improve and modernise children's services within the current budget constraints. YAFCA has been a long established group which some have recognised, needs to reset its relationship with the new leadership and influence the future constructively. Part of managing this change well requires clear communication from both the local authority and YAFCA .

All of those consulted have spoken openly about their views, frustrations and disappointment in the uplift decision and I would like to thank them for their time and their honesty in response to my questions.

Suggestions for improvement came from foster carers as a result of this consultation; these are welcomed and included in the recommendations set out below.

## **Recommendations**

The council to set out a clear framework for consultation and communication on future decisions on uplifts, fees and allowances.

The council and YAFCA to agree a communications strategy to include future developments planned by the council, future consultations and clear channels for YAFCA to raise concerns.

The council to consider implementing the uplift for 2019/20 for those foster carers on level one and two to strengthen the recruitment strategy.

The council, in partnership with YAFCA, to host an annual conference for foster carers

YAFCA to consider how as an organisation it can reach all foster carers to offer support and positive working relationships with the council.

The council to consider non-monetary awards for long standing foster carers.

Audrey Williamson  
Independent consultant  
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