

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Cabinet

DATE: Monday 18th March 2024

SUBJECT: Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers, including benefits of Fostering Friendly Employer status

CHIEF OFFICER: Sue Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive of Slough Children First

CONTACT OFFICER: Ben Short, Director of Operations, Slough Children First

WARD(S): All

PORTFOLIO: Councillor Puja Bedi – Lead Member Children's Services

KEY DECISION: No

EXEMPT: No

DECISION SUBJECT TO CALL IN: Yes

APPENDICES: None

1. Summary and Recommendations

1.1 This report highlights the national shortage of foster carers and the steps the Council has and can continue to take to recruit and retain foster carers to ensure Slough's looked after children have the secure and safe homes they deserve.

1.2 The steps recommended build on the Council's Children and Young People's Placement Sufficiency Strategy approved in November 2023.

2. Recommendations:

Cabinet is recommended to:

- (a) Agree to submission of an application for the Council to be granted Fostering Friendly Employer status.
- (b) Note the steps being taken by Slough Children First Ltd to be granted Fostering Friendly Employer status.
- (c) Note the wider steps being taken to increase recruitment and retention of foster carers, including encouraging other local employers to adopt Fostering Friendly Employer policies and status.

Reason:

The Fostering Network states that 40% of foster carers juggle employment with their caring responsibilities. Fostering Friendly is a policy that is designed to support foster carers in the

workplace. It includes offering foster carers flexible working hours and paid time off for training and settling a newly placed child into their home. The Fostering Network's Fostering Friendly employers scheme offers businesses of any size a chance to make a difference for foster carers and the children they care for in their local communities and improve support for their own employees at the same time. Employers who join the scheme agree to put in place a fostering friendly HR policy for all foster carers in their employment regardless of the organisation for which they foster.

Commissioner Review:

DFE Commissioner

No comments made.

DLUHC Commissioner

No specific comments to add.

3. Introduction

3.1 Slough Borough Council and Slough Children First (SCF) are responsible, as a Corporate Parent, for children who become cared for by the local authority. In Slough, as nationally, there is a shortage of suitable foster carers for children who need a foster home. The Council has a duty to provide a sufficient number and range of foster carers to meet our children's needs, and in line with our sufficiency strategy, recruiting more foster carers is a significant priority.

3.2 The Council adopted an HR policy in 2020 to support employees who are foster carers, however, to date no formal application has been made for Fostering Friendly Employer status. SCF is a separate employer and has recently adopted a similar HR policy to support its staff to become foster carers. The support will apply regardless of whether the employee is a foster carer for Slough or for another area. This means that even those staff who may otherwise have a conflict of interest in becoming a foster carer for their own employer may still be encouraged to be a foster carer for a looked after child in another area.

4.Options Considered

4.1

The following options were considered:

Option	Pros	Cons	Recommended
Maintain status quo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The leave policy already exists; therefore Council employees are already supported with becoming foster carers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of opportunity to promote the opportunities of fostering to a wider range of local employers. Without formal status, the Council cannot use the Fostering Friendly Employer logo, which may encourage job applications from individuals who are already foster carers and sends a message out of other local employers about the benefits of supporting employees who are foster carers. 	Not recommended

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council loses the ability to support the national drive to increase the number of foster carers. 	
<p>Apply for the Fostering Friendly Employer status and promote this to other local employers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows clear commitment to local residents about the benefits of fostering. Will achieve Foster Friendly status and associated use of logo. Supports the sufficiency strategy. Leading the way to enable conversations with local employers, including schools and health settings, to adopt a similar approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The status may not have the impact on a scale required, bearing in mind the policy has existed since 2020. 	<p>Recommended</p>

5. Background

5.1 Each week there are children requiring foster placements, resulting in an urgent need for SCF to continue recruiting and retaining foster carers. The benefits of an increase in foster placements are that children can be placed in local homes with trained carers who can support their needs and that the use of expensive residential placements, sometimes located some distance away from Slough, are reduced.

5.2 By reviewing and increasing the support available to foster carers, including support from their employers, this increases the opportunity to recruit and retain more foster carers. Three initiatives have been considered by SCF to increase recruitment:

- Publicising the support offered by the Council by applying for Fostering Friendly Employer status.
- SCF obtaining Fostering Friendly Employer status.
- Promoting the benefits of supporting employees to become and stay as foster carers to other local employers.

5.3 Joining the scheme shows a strong corporate social responsibility and gives the message that foster carers are valued by Slough Borough Council and Slough Children First.

5.4 The Fostering Network (the UK's leading charity on fostering) May 2023 research titled 'Foster Care Retention and Recruitment in England' recently made some recommendations following extensive research that included prospective and approved foster carers experiences. One of the recommendations was a '*more personalised approach to recruitment that includes flexibility for prospective foster carers who work.*' Becoming foster friendly will therefore mean local employers can demonstrate they are part of implementing this national recommendation on increasing and retaining foster carers in England.

5.5 Fostering Friendly employers are also asked to promote Fostering Fortnight, an annual campaign to raise the profile of fostering and to encourage people to consider becoming foster carers and offering vulnerable children the care they need. This year Foster Care Fortnight takes place 13-26 May where a range of recruitment and celebration events will take place within the Borough including pop-up stands in Observatory House, Sainsbury's, and Community Centres. We also hope to be able to support recruitment of foster carers with our faith community. The fortnight

will culminate in a children in care celebration event on 29th May.

5.6 It should be noted that the Fostering Friendly status and the leave associated with it also apply to employees who are being recruited by an independent fostering agency or another local authority. Whilst SCF does not receive the direct benefit of this, it does allow the Council, SCF and other local employers to support fostering on a national level and does enable staff who may otherwise be conflicted in becoming a foster carer from being able to foster in another area.

5.7 Being a foster carer is a rewarding role that has a real, and lasting beneficial effect on children's lives. It is not without challenges and requires the carer to be involved in additional activities, such as attending health appointments or statutory meetings about the child or young person in their care.

5.8 Foster carers require a network of support to provide children with the best care they can, this will include social workers, teachers, and their own wider family. Many foster carers (40% nationally) are also in full, or part time employment, and it is important that their employer understands the importance of their role in caring for vulnerable children and supports them to do so.

5.9 SCF is reviewing the level and type of support provided to foster carers and will keep this under review, including taking account of feedback from existing foster carers and national best practice evidence.

5.Financial Implications

6.1 With regards to the fostering network, there is no cost attached to becoming a fostering friendly employer as the Fostering network does not charge any fees for joining. The Council already has foster friendly HR policies and therefore there is no additional financial implications of adopting new policies. SCF will need to manage any additional cost of implementing foster friendly policies within its agreed contract sum.

6.2 SCF will be responsible for the cost of any initiatives to promote the Foster Friendly employer policies and wider promotion of fostering. There is an opportunity of significant savings from reducing the reliance on residential placements, which will support SCF deliver savings within its medium-term financial strategy. As SCF receives most of its funding from the Council, this also supports the Council's medium term financial strategy.

7.Legal implications

7.1 The Council and SCF share duties in relation to securing that children who cannot live with their parents or wider family networks are placed in suitable and loving homes to meet their needs. The Council is the corporate parent for looked after children and has a general duty to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. Guidance associated with this overarching duty emphasise that looked after children deserve the best experiences in life, from excellent parenting who promotes good health and educational attainment, to a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills to have an enjoyable childhood and successful adult life. Stable placements are an essential element to this, and good quality foster carers place a vital role in children's lives.

8.Corporate Parenting implications

8.1 The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced corporate parenting principles, which comprise of seven needs that local authorities must have regard to whenever they exercise a function. To thrive, looked after children need to feel and be safe, to have stability in their lives and build resilience by forging strong and trusted relationships. This means, as far as possible, maintaining consistency in the home environment and having strong relationships with carers.

9.Risk management implications

9.1 None identified.

10.Environmental implications

10.1 None identified.

11.Equality implications

11.1 Certain protected characteristics are likely to be over-represented in the looked after community and in particular children requiring foster care. This includes children from specific ethnic groups, children with disabilities and children in specific age groups. Identifying specialist carers who can support children with needs, including those having experienced specific trauma, is essential to ensure these children have the best opportunities to thrive.

12.Workforce implications

12.1 The approach supports staff to be more involved and engaged in the recruitment of foster carers and encourages staff to foster.

13.Background Papers

13.1 None