

Time off for fostering policy

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to present the time off for fostering policy and procedure. This policy is proposed as part of the recruitment campaign to increase the number of foster carers in the county and to become a fostering friendly authority.

Background

2. In Wiltshire, there are currently around 420 children in care and of these about 45% have been placed with 171 Wiltshire approved foster carers. The fostering service has a target of placing 75% of children in care with Wiltshire approved foster carers by 2018. This is an aspirational target and the service is working very hard to recruit the new foster carers that are needed for all types of fostering, including older children and those who need long term placements.
3. The council's strategy includes a target to recruit 20 - 30 new fostering households in Wiltshire each year to provide an increased proportion of in-house foster placements. However, both nationally and locally it is hard to recruit and retain foster carers, and the number of children in care rises year on year.
4. It is clear that children achieve better outcomes when they are able to live with the same foster carer throughout the time they need to be in care, living in their home community and attending the same school, if it is possible and safe to do so. Maintaining contact with family and friends is important for most children in care and foster carers have an important part to play in this.
5. The council has a fostering recruitment strategy which identifies how the service will recruit, assess and approve foster carers, including targeted recruitment work with companies and organisations deemed to be fostering friendly by the fostering network.
6. The fostering network defines fostering friendly as an employer having a suitable policy in place to allow their staff who are foster carers, and those wishing to be approved as foster carers, additional time off work when they are being assessed and then to support them to look after a child successfully.
7. A number of organisations, including around 29 county, city and borough/district councils, have been identified by the fostering network as having appropriate arrangements in place to support staff who are approved foster carers. It is also

likely that there are other organisations which make the provision but have not yet been formally recognised.

Main considerations

8. In order to become a fostering friendly employer the council must have an effective policy in place to support foster carers who are employed by the council. The fostering network has provided a sample time off for fostering policy which has been adapted in the council's policy style and is attached at appendix 1.
9. The policy acknowledges the contribution that foster carers make to society and especially the lives of children in care, and that foster carers who do other work in addition to fostering need some flexibility in their working arrangements to meet the needs of their fostered child.
10. The proposals allow additional time off in a 12 month period for prospective and approved foster carers as follows:
 - Up to three days in total to attend assessment and initial training prior to approval as a foster carer
 - Up to one day to attend the approving foster panel
 - Up to five days in total to attend a child's in care review, annual foster carer review, health and education related meetings associated with a child that is cared for, foster carer training, foster panel and other associated meetings
11. The policy outlines that the foster carer's line manager would need to approve the leave although managers will be encouraged to approve leave wherever possible particularly when it is for the purpose of attending panels, assessments and training which cannot be easily re-arranged. The leave would be considered and approved on a pro rata basis for part time employees.
12. In addition, if further time off was required for fostering this would need to be discussed with the line manager and consideration could be given to other options which may include flexible working, annual leave, time off in lieu or unpaid leave.

Environmental Impact of the proposal

13. None

Equalities impact of the proposal

14. An equality analysis panel took place on 14 December 2017. The panel noted that the opportunity to be a foster carer was open to all groups with protected characteristics and the intention of the policy was to offer positive support to any member of staff who becomes a foster carer.
15. However, it was noted that singling out this particular group of staff for additional paid leave could be challenged by other groups of staff such as those with caring

responsibilities who have an entitlement for additional leave, but this is unpaid. The implementation of this policy could therefore pose a risk of equal pay. Further legal advice is being sought.

Risk Assessment

16. None

Financial Implications of the proposal

17. The three days' additional leave entitlement for the assessment and initial training, and the day to attend the approving panel would be one-off entitlements. The five days a year would be applicable in the first year of fostering and in any subsequent years where the employee remained as an active, approved foster carer.

18. There are currently three foster carers who work for the council and so there would be limited impact of the additional leave. If a further 10-15 foster carers were recruited, there would still be small net impact across the whole business of the council.

19. The expectation would be that the service area would in the first instance attempt to cover the absences within their current establishment and that there would only be an additional cost to this policy should there be a need to cover the leave.

Recommendations

20. It is recommended that:

- Staffing policy committee approve the time off for fostering policy and procedure to support current employees who are foster carers and become fostering friendly authority.

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