



People, Performance and Development Committee  
29 September 2015

**Foster Carer Leave, Friends and Family Carer Leave and Staying Put Carer Leave**

**Purpose of the report:**

This report outlines Surrey County Council's proposed approach to becoming a Foster Friendly Employer. Surrey County Council's Fostering Service is looking to implement a number of measures to target our own workforce as a source of possible foster carers, friends and family carers, and staying put carers, to support our looked after children and those young people previously in foster care who may be transitioning into Adult Social Care services or in becoming independent.

This report is being brought to People, Performance and Development Committee because the Committee determines policy on pay, terms and conditions of employment of all staff according to the Scheme of Delegation.

**Recommendations:**

It is recommended that:

1. The Committee endorse proposals to promote foster caring, friends and family caring, and staying put caring to Surrey County Council employees and to agree to the introduction of Foster Carer Leave, Friends and Family Carer Leave and Staying Put Carer Leave as an additional category in the Council's Special Leave Policy.
2. Foster children, including those under friends and family foster care and young people under a staying put arrangement, are recognised as dependents for the purposes of emergency leave.

**Introduction:**

1. Surrey County Council (SCC) looks after on average 800 children per year. In line with national trends, this number is increasing, with younger children entering care following abuse or neglect and more teenagers needing to be looked after following family breakdown. 75% of our children

are placed in foster care and the remaining children are in residential homes, placed for adoption, in independent living or placed with parents.

2. The shortage of foster families has resulted in a growing number of children being separated from their siblings, or being placed out of county in a placement that better meets their needs.
3. The demographic profile of foster carers, many of whom are approaching retirement age, places further pressure on the future number foster carers. Research by the Fostering Network in 2009 shows that 94% of foster carers nationally are aged 40 and over and 65% are aged 50 and over.
4. Transition into adulthood is often a turbulent time for any young person. For many young adults, transition to adulthood can be extended and delayed until they are emotionally and financially ready. Young people who are looked after may not have this option and many care leavers are expected to cope with independent living too early and without adequate support. Consequently, the Department for Education (DfE) introduced a new duty on local authorities called 'Staying Put'. The primary aim of Staying Put is to promote a gradual transition for young people from care to adulthood and independent living. It focuses on ways to extend this transition within a family setting for young people who are or who have been looked after by the local authority.
5. To address the challenges around fostering, the Government has called on employers to become "foster family friendly". This report outlines SCC's proposed approach to becoming a Foster Friendly Employer, achieving this not only for foster carers, but also friends and family carers and staying put carers, to support our looked after children and those young people previously in foster care who may be transitioning into Adult Social Care services or in becoming independent. Broadening the scope of the measures to include friends and family carers and staying put carers will demonstrate a commitment by SCC to being foster family friendly and achieving the best outcomes for children and young people in Surrey.

## Proposals

6. The initiative to increase the number of SCC employees applying to be foster carers, friends and family carers and staying put carers includes:
  - All time off to attend meetings, home visits and training, including travel and waiting time during the assessment to approval process for prospective foster carers and friends and family carers, will be paid at the employee's normal weekly rate of pay. If working hours vary from week to week, pay will be based on the average pay for the previous 12 complete working weeks, excluding overtime unless it is compulsory. This is for prospective foster carers and friends and family carers only; staying put carers do not undergo an assessment process.
  - Unpaid special leave once approved as either a foster carer or friends and family carer and a child is in placement or a young person is in a staying put arrangement. This can be for meetings with the Home Office, social work review meetings, schools, unforeseen emergencies

- relating to their caring role, pathway planning meetings and/or to accommodate an emergency placement and attend training.
- Recognising foster children, friends and family foster care children and young people in a staying put arrangement as dependents for the purposes of emergency leave.
7. The SCC foster care assessment to approval process usually takes six months. As part of the assessment process, prospective SCC foster carers must attend the Surrey County Council Skills to Foster Training. This entails attending one session a week over a six week period, the same evening each week between 6.30pm to 9.30pm, plus one whole Saturday. In addition, prospective Surrey foster carers have between 8 to 10 home visits with a social worker lasting approximately two hours. The number of meetings, home visits and training sessions a prospective foster carer attends during their assessment process and length of time it takes to become an approved foster carer may vary if they wish to foster through an Independent Fostering Agency, rather than through the County Council.
  8. Surrey Friends and Family Foster Carers undertake the same assessment process as foster carers, as outlined in the above paragraph. However, the timescales are much shorter, with the assessment legally taking up to 16 weeks before being taken to Foster Panel.
  9. Currently, any SCC employee who is a prospective or approved foster carer, friends and family carer, or a staying put carer, must attend any meetings or training in their own time. In comparison, SCC provides leave to support employees in other circumstances where this supports family friendly or wider public duties benefits, for example managers may grant up to five days paid special leave for absence of staff where they are the "nominated carer" of the birth mother or adoptive mother and/or father.
  10. A number of local authorities, universities and private sector companies have foster care friendly policies in place:
    - Tesco and O2 have policies that offer employees up to five days paid leave for to attend related meetings and training as part of the fostering assessment process. Tesco recognises foster children as dependents for the purposes of emergency leave and their foster carers also have access to a shift swap scheme.
    - Brighton and Hove City Council offers employees up to a maximum of three days paid leave to attend any meetings, home visits or mandatory training as part of the fostering assessment process. In addition, employees who are approved foster carers may be granted up to a maximum of five days paid leave in any leave year to enable them to attend the required training courses, review meetings and any other meetings in connection with the child's placement. Requests for emergency leave are considered under the Council's special leave policy.
    - Leicester City Council offers employees three days paid leave to attend the fostering assessment and training process, as well as access to other family friendly policy provisions around flexible working.

- Birmingham City Council offers up to eight days paid leave during the fostering assessment process.
- Norfolk City Council offers up to eight days paid leave during the fostering assessment process.
- University of Dundee offers a maximum of two days paid leave following a formal fostering arrangement. This is subject to a maximum of four days paid leave per year. This arrangement is only applicable to long term fostering, which would not normally be less than six months. Their policy also applies to friends and family carers.
- Department for Education offers discretionary special paid leave for up to five days in a 12 month period for leave during the fostering assessment process, an additional five days' paid or unpaid leave in a 12 month period at line manager's discretion as additional leave during fostering approval process or when child is in placement and additional discretionary special paid leave for up to ten days in a 12 month period at the start of a planned permanent placement. If both parents are employed, one parent would receive up to ten days and the other up to five days.

11. In light of the time off required to complete the assessment to approval process and other existing family friendly provisions for time off, it is requested that Foster Carer Leave, Friends and Family Carer Leave and Staying Put Carer Leave is introduced for SCC employees as an additional category within the Council's Special Leave Policy.

### **Encouraging other employers to adopt and adapt the scheme within their organisations**

12. SCC is working together with Reigate and Banstead Borough Council to become foster friendly employers. It is hoped that this partnership will encourage the other ten district and borough councils and other organisations based within the county to follow our example.

13. As part of this initiative, the Fostering Service will also identify and engage with big businesses based in the county in the first instance, to encourage them to become foster friendly employers.

### **Resource implications**

12. Foster care is significantly more cost effective in providing care to children than other types of placement. Alternatives to in-house foster care include residential care (which is considerably more expensive), foster care placements through an independent fostering agency commissioned by the County Council or friends and family care. The average cost of a Surrey in-house fostering placement is £16k per annum. This compares with an average cost of £44k per annum for an independent fostering agency placement.

13. This proposal forms part of the Fostering Service's strategy to recruit more foster carers. It is anticipated that only a small proportion of foster carers, friends and family carers, and staying put carers would come from

the SCC's workforce, with the majority of these carers coming from the wider Surrey population.

## **Conclusions:**

### **Financial and value for money implications**

14. Foster Carer Leave, Friends and Family Carer Leave and Staying Put Carer Leave will be promoted to staff through an internal communications campaign which will include recruitment event stalls across SCC buildings and information made available on the intranet. It will also be promoted on the SCC website jobs pages as one of the benefits of working for Surrey. As such, any costs incurred will be minimal; communications on the intranet will incur no costs and recruitment events will be run by SCC staff, with any costs for the events being met out of the Fostering Service budget.
15. Costs for paid time off during the assessment to approval process for prospective foster carers and prospective friends and family carers, as with all other special leave, will be absorbed within team budgets. staying put carers do not undergo an assessment process and so this does not apply to them.

### **Equalities and Diversity Implications**

16. All SCC employees who apply to become a foster carer, friends and family carer and are accepted onto the appropriate training programme run by their chosen agency or become a staying put carer will be able to make a request to access the time off under this category of special leave. Decisions regarding eligibility for the training programme will be made within the statutory provisions for foster care.
17. SCC staff who work in frontline social work teams in the Children's and Safeguarding Service and who have direct involvement in the planning and decision making for looked after children may be unable to become approved SCC foster carers. The reason being the potential conflict of interest between their professional role and that of a foster carer. Any conflict of interest may be of detriment to the interests of looked after children and therefore must be avoided. These will be considered on a case by case basis by the Council's Fostering Service.

### **Legal Implications**

18. The arguments for or against adopting such a policy are not matters for legal review as to whether it will achieve its purpose, cost and desirability. The Council is free to adopt policies that go beyond the statutory requirements.

### **Risk Management Implications**

19. None.

**Next steps:**

To implement agreed recommendations

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**Sources/background papers:**

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- Leicester City Council. Hours and Leave Policy.
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