AGENDA ITEM NO 9
REPORT NO 252/11

ANGUS COUNCIL
SOCIAL WORK AND HEALTH COMMITTEE
7 APRIL 2011
AMENDMENT TO FOSTERING SCHEME
REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK AND HEALTH

ABSTRACT
This report sets out proposals to amend the current Angus Council Fostering Scheme. Specifically it makes recommendations regarding the way foster carers are paid when they have vacancies and when they take children for respite care.

1  RECOMMENDATION
It is recommended that the Social Work and Health Committee approves the changes to the fostering scheme set out below with effect from 25th April 2011.

2.  INTRODUCTION
A new fostering scheme was agreed by the Social Work and Health Committee on 7 January 2010 (report 2/10) and implemented in April last year. Under the scheme carers are paid a fostering allowance for each child they have in placement, along with a carer’s allowance which is in effect a fee for the service they provide. The level of the fostering allowances was significantly increased to bring it into line with the rates recommended by the Fostering Network, widely used as a benchmark by other authorities and independent fostering agencies.

The new scheme has been welcomed by foster carers. It provides a sound base for recruiting additional carers in the context of greatly increased competition from independent fostering agencies. However in reviewing the scheme at the end of the first year it is apparent that a number of relatively minor changes are required to make sure the payment system supports the focus on finding placements for the most vulnerable children. These changes concern payments for vacancies and for respite care.

Under the current scheme foster carers continue to receive their carer’s allowance or fee even when they have a vacancy. These payments only cease when the carer’s approval is reviewed by the Council’s fostering panel, usually annually. The original objectives of this aspect of the scheme were to enhance placement choice for children needing to be placed in care and to give foster carers a degree of security and predictability in terms of their income.

One year into the scheme it is evident that the number of vacancies is higher than anticipated. Although the scheme has succeeded in giving foster carers a degree of predictability about their income it is not clear that this is leading to placements being identified for more children. To an extent there is a reverse incentive for carers agreeing to additional placements given that their income remains unchanged. It is therefore proposed that time limits are introduced for these vacancy payments as set out below.
A further amendment is proposed in relation to payments for respite care. Rather than the current system whereby carers receive an additional annual payment if they are prepared to offer respite care it is proposed that this will be replaced by a weekly carer’s allowance only for the weeks they have a child in placement. This will have little overall impact on the cost of the service but will ensure that carers get paid according to the amount of respite they provide.

3 PROPOSALS

It is proposed that the following amendments to the fostering scheme are introduced from 25 April 2011:

i) Payments to new foster carers will commence from the date of their first placement rather than from the date of approval.

ii) The child’s component of the carer’s allowance (currently £2,000 per annum per child) will cease 8 weeks after the placement becomes vacant.

iii) The core element of the carer’s allowance will cease after 4 months if the carer has no child in placement.

iv) The existing respite payment will be replaced by a weekly allowance of £155 paid in addition to the child’s allowance but only for the days the child is with the foster carers.

The weekly respite payment will not be paid if the carer is already being paid for a vacancy.

These proposals were discussed in outline at the Foster Carers Consultative Group in November 2010. From late December 2010 they have been available to foster carers for comment on the website. A meeting of the carers’ support group in February 2011 was devoted to a discussion of the proposals. Foster carers largely accepted that the current position was unsustainable and that the proposals were a proportionate response to the issue of vacant placements.

4 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

It is anticipated that the proposals will result in a small saving or be cost neutral depending on the future level of vacancies.

5 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

There are no Human Rights implications arising from the recommendation contained in this report.

6 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

The issues in this report have been the subject of consideration from an equalities perspective. An equalities impact assessment is not required.

7 CONSULTATION

The Chief Executive, the Director of Corporate Services, the Head of Finance and the Head of Law and Administration have been consulted in the preparation of this report. The proposals have been discussed with the Angus Foster Carers’ Consultative group and at a specially convened Carers’ Support group meeting.
8 SINGLE OUTCOME AGREEMENT

This report contributes to the following local outcomes contained within the Angus Single Outcome Agreement:

Nurtured: Children and young people in Angus will live within a supportive family setting with additional assistance if required, or where this is not possible, within another care setting ensuring a positive and rewarding childhood experience (National Outcome 5).

9 CONCLUSION

The fostering scheme introduced in April 2010 has been helpful in attracting and retaining foster carers and in developing an increasingly well trained and professional fostering service. The amendments to the scheme proposed in this report address concerns about the level of vacancy payments and strike a balance between promoting the placement of the most vulnerable children while continuing to provide carers with the security and predictability that allows them to make a commitment to the service.

R PEAT
DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK AND HEALTH

NOTE: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

SW&H/RP/RD