

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 17 April 2025

REPORTING OFFICER: Executive Director, Children's Services

PORTFOLIO: Children and Young People

SUBJECT: Specialist Foster Carers

WARD(S) Borough Wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report proposes that the Council approve the invest to save proposal of recruiting 2 Specialist Foster Carer's as an additional care option for our Children & Young People with complex needs in Care.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- 1) note the contents of the report; and**
- 2) approve recruitment of 2 Specialist Foster Carers as part of a scheme that aims to move children and or young people from high cost residential placements into a foster care, family environment.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 What are Specialist Foster Carers?

Specialist Foster Carers for children & young people with complex needs, such as trauma, behavioural issues, disabilities or any other kind of sever disruption prior to being placed into foster care.

Specialist Foster Carers are required to have specific qualifications and experience:

- Have experience of working with children & young people in a professional capacity i.e., Youth Workers, Social Workers, Teachers, Allied Health Professionals, Emergency Services personnel, Therapeutic practitioners etc.
- Experience of working with children & young people with complex needs.
- Understanding of how trauma, attachment, and neglect affect children and adolescents.

- Understanding of child development and effects of life experience.

Specialist Foster Carer scheme aims to enable young people to step down from residential care and move to a family environment that can continue to meet their needs.

Specialist fosters carers are expected to include one non-working carer and to hold demonstrable skills and experience. They will be paid an enhanced allowance “fixed fee” to provide 24/7, long & or short-term care to our children aged mainly between 6 and 16 with complex needs.

3.2 **Benefits of Specialist Foster Carers Scheme**

For the Child

The benefits to a child of foster care are many, as follows:

- **Stability:** Foster care provides a stable home for children.
- **Trust Building:** It helps children rebuild trust, especially if they have experienced trauma.
- **Educational Support:** Foster care services may assist with educational needs.
- **Social and Emotional Skills:** Children learn social and emotional skills.
- **Nurturing and Loving Environment:** Foster homes provide a caring atmosphere.
- **Opportunity to Break Negative Cycles:** Foster care offers a chance to end negative family patterns.
- **Second Chance and Basic Life Skills:** Children get a fresh start and develop life skills.

For the Council

Moving children from high cost placements into foster care will reduce costs for the Council. In some cases, children with complex needs cost the Council up to £16,000 per person per week. Regionally, the allowance for Specialist Foster Carers is around £1000 each week. The savings potential has been expanded upon below.

3.3 **Which cohort of Children are suited to Specialist Foster Care?**

Children with complex needs. Those in solo and unregulated residential placements, that due to National sufficiency challenges are not able to live with family's who foster, typically aged between 6 and 16.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 Not applicable.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 Placements for Children in Care are fluid so the financial information in each option below identified average costs associated for illustration purposes.

5.2 **Option 1 Do Nothing / Rely on long-term impact of Sufficiency Strategy**

Doing nothing isn't an option.

If we rely solely on the medium to long term sufficiency plan to take effect, and embed cost savings will no doubt be achieved through initiatives such as:

- Continued weekly scrutiny, tracking & monitoring of placement and support package requests via Resource Panel.
- Re-design of internal residential estate between now and 2028.
- Targeted review of those children subject to 'Placement with Parents' with the aim to discharged care orders.
- The development of Edge of Care service and therefore aim to divert children & young people from entering care.
- Targeted review of those young people appropriate for step down into supported accommodations (age 16+)

The Specialist Foster Carer Scheme is simply another initiative that compliments the above and provides the Local Authority with more ways to improve the lives of children in care whilst significantly reducing current forecasted overspend on placements.

5.3 **Option 2 Recruit Two Specialist Foster Carers**

This option builds on the already agreed cost saving initiatives and strengthens the Local Authorities range of options available to them when placing children with complex needs into care settings. Often these decisions are made in times of crisis and when 'placement choices' are either nil or limited to National sufficiency challenges.

Recruiting two Specialist Foster Carers (self-employed as per existing 60 Mainstream Foster carers) and paying them an annual fee of £52,000 per year (£1000 per week) will incur a total baseline annual cost of £104,000.

Using the average per person per week residential placement cost (£7,000), the forecasted minimum cost savings per Specialist Foster Carer household over a three year period would be **£936,000** (this has not factored in further year on year inflation uplifts). This equates to £312,000 per child per year, saving. One child being

considered for a specialist foster home is currently costing £676,000 per year resulting in a potential saving of £624,000.

NB

- Specialist Foster Carers will receive council tax exemption (value subject to Halton's banding).
- Specialist Foster Carers will receive phone allowance £15 each month.
- Children in Care continue to receive birthday/Christmas/holiday allowances as per Fostering Allowance Guide 23-24 this should not be seen as an allowance for the carer.
- Wrap around support from internal/external sources i.e. EDT/Virtual School, Emotional Wellbeing will need to become part of the scheme but in terms of funding these children & people should be in receipt of these services already. This will enable us to co-ordinate and utilise existing resources more efficiently.

Proceeding with this option will result in significant reduction in placement spend. Impact will be from when the first child moves into the Specialist Foster Carers care. If the placement breaks down or the child or young person moves on in planned way in line with their care/transition plan then the carer would be introduced to another young person and so on.

Estimated time for mobilisation of the scheme is 6-9 months from decision to fund (this allows time for safe recruitment, assessment, approval, training, matching & placing).

Through initial screening of high costs placement data (ranging from £7,000 - £16,000 per person per week) we have at least 17 individuals at the moment (this figure is fluid and will fluctuate) who would need assessing against these two Specialist Foster Carers homes/beds. The information available in relation to the cohort will enable us to design and run a targeted and planned recruitment campaign with specific children and young people in mind.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

The specialist foster care model focuses on improving health, promoting wellbeing, and fostering independence through specialist foster carers. This approach could involve:

- Training foster carers to support children with specific health or emotional needs, such as those with disabilities, trauma, or complex medical conditions.
- Providing therapeutic support to help children develop resilience and emotional stability.
- Encouraging independence by equipping young people with life skills, confidence, and support networks to transition successfully into adulthood.
- Collaborating with healthcare professionals to ensure the best possible physical and mental health outcomes.

6.2 **Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy**
N/A

6.3 **Supporting Children, Young People and Families**

Supporting children, young people, and families through specialist foster carers to improve health, promote wellbeing, and encourage greater independence.

6.4 **Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need**
N/A

6.5 **Working Towards a Greener Future**
N/A

6.6 **Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community**
N/A

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 Without careful and considerate communication with Halton's current cohort of Mainstream Foster Carers there is a risk that the Specialist Foster Care Scheme, in particular the annual fee of £52,000 will result in animosity and even resignations of existing carers.

7.2 This risk is low because the current cohort of Mainstream Foster Carers in Halton do not meet the proposed Specialist Foster Carer specification and role description. And it is proposed a series of engagement and awareness sessions be delivered to overcome any hostility / myth bust.

7.3 Despite there being several cost saving projects underway aimed at reducing placement costs. There is no risk of double count savings as the number of children in need of such specialist provision significantly out weights internal bed occupancy now and this will continue to be the case even when the proposed long term sufficiency strategy becomes a reality.

7.4 Risk the Specialist Carers will be paid and not have a child or young person in placement, this will not be the case. Halton's need for specialist foster care placements far out weights the current level of sufficiency.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which means that, in carrying out their functions, they have a statutory duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't.

8.2 Protected Characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

8.3 If the recommendations in this report are agreed we are committing to positive outcomes for young people from across a range of protected characteristics by ensuring they have access to the best care we can offer.

9.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 N/A

10.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

10.1 None under the meaning of the Act.