

Report to: Governance Committee
Date of meeting: 7 March 2023
By: Chief Operating Officer
Title: Additional leave for foster parents
Purpose: To ask the Governance Committee to consider providing additional paid leave for foster parents

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Governance Committee is recommended to:

Agree that additional paid leave, as set out in paragraph 2.2 below, is made available to employees who are foster parents

1 Background

- 1.1 In addition to annual leave, employees are also entitled to leave for a variety of purposes, including unpaid dependent care/parental leave, paid time off for specific public duties or military reserve activities, and paid compassionate leave. Various flexible working options are also available to help employees balance work with personal commitments.
- 1.2 The Corporate Management Team recently considered a proposal to provide additional paid leave to foster parents and is supportive. As this is a change in policy, approval is now sought from the Governance Committee.

2 Supporting information

- 2.1 A proposal has been made for the Council to join the 'Fostering Friendly Employer' accreditation scheme. The scheme is run by the Fostering Network, a charity whose aim is to support those who foster, improve opportunities for fostered children, and to provide expert guidance to all fostering services.
- 2.2 In order to be accredited as 'Fostering Friendly', employers must commit to providing employees with:
 - three days paid leave for assessment and training prior to becoming a foster parent;
 - one day for attendance at the approval panel;
 - up to five days paid leave to attend child review meetings, annual foster parent review meetings, and training.

These are annual entitlements, although it is anticipated that employees would normally only need to access leave for the initial assessment training, and attendance at the approval panel once.

- 2.3 Once accredited, employers can display the 'Fostering Friendly' logo on their website and recruitment material, in the same way as ESCC currently does for the Disability Confident and Defence Employers schemes.
- 2.4 The employer is also expected to support promotion of the Fostering Network's annual Foster Care Fortnight campaign. This could be facilitated as part of business as usual and would not have any particular resourcing implications. The Fostering Network provide a range of resources employers can use to promote the event on social media etc.

2.5 Becoming Fostering Friendly may have a number of benefits for ESCC:

- aiding recruitment and retention by reinforcing our reputation as an employer of choice and demonstrating that we are a supportive employer;
- visibly demonstrating our support for fostering as an employer, in a way that is consistent with our role as a provider of children's services. This may in turn encourage other employers in the County to provide additional leave for foster parents in their workforce;
- increasing the potential for the Fostering Team to recruit foster parents from within the Council's own workforce. New foster parents may be more likely to apply to foster for ESCC direct, rather than via an agency, which in turn represents a saving for the Council;
- improving support for foster parents already in the workforce may aid wellbeing and engagement and reduce absence for those foster parents already in the workforce.

2.6 Around 66 employers are accredited as 'Fostering Friendly Employers', including 25 County, City or Borough Councils, and the independent fostering agencies TACT and Outcomes First. None of ESCC's immediate neighbours are members at present, but a small number of authorities in our benchmarking group, including WSCC and BHCC, provide comparable entitlements of 5-10 days leave per year.

Financial appraisal

2.7 In principle, there would be a cost to providing this additional leave allowance. We do not currently record the number of foster parents in the workforce. However based on information available from GOV.UK, foster parents make up approximately 0.21% of the UK population aged 18-64. Even if we assume foster parents are overrepresented in the ESCC workforce compared to the general population, it is reasonable to assume they currently represent no more than 1% of ESCC's corporate workforce.

2.8 As per para 2.2 above, four of the nine days' additional leave proposed for foster parents would not typically be accessed on an annual basis. The table below therefore shows the estimated costs, based on an average FTE daily salary of £106, for both five days' leave per year and nine days per year.

2.9 These figures are based on the entitlement being available to corporate employees; Schools would be given the option of adopting the provision should they wish to.

Number of days leave per year used	Estimated percentage of eligible employees	Number of days taken per year based on corporate workforce of 4555 people	Annual cost based on average FTE daily salary of £106
5	1%	227.75	£24,141
9	1%	409.9	£43,454

2.10 These calculations assume that an additional resource is deployed to cover the employee's absence on a like-for-like basis. However, subject to the business needs of the service, it will often be possible to cover the absence using existing resources at no additional cost, as is typically the case for annual leave and other planned absence. The indicative costs above would be spread across the organisation.

3 Conclusion and Recommendations

- 3.1 Providing additional fostering leave and therefore gaining Fostering Friendly status would visibly demonstrate the Council's support for fostering as an employer. This may in turn aid recruitment and retention, as well as engagement with other employers considering providing similar support to their own employees. It may also help to recruit foster parents from the workforce who would go on to foster direct with ESCC rather than with agencies, which represents a saving for the Council.
- 3.2 Providing this additional leave might also reduce levels of unplanned absence amongst existing foster carers, such as sick leave or emergency leave. Any potential costs should be balanced against the overall benefit to employee wellbeing, recruitment and retention.
- 3.3 Set against the above, the Governance Committee is recommended to agree that additional paid leave as set out in paragraph 2.2 above is made available to employees who are foster parents.

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