

22 October 2017

Foster Carer Retainer Payments: More Cost Efficient in the Long Term

Foster carers retainer payments are increasingly becoming the focus of fostering service providers, particularly local authorities who are facing further cuts to budgets again this year. A recent survey conducted by the Fostering Network highlighted that of the foster carers surveyed, only 19% of local authority foster carers received some form of retainer payment. Even fewer independent fostering agency foster carers received them, at just 8%.

GMB earlier this year raised concerns with regards the removal of retainer payments in evidence submitted into the Education Select Committee Inquiry into Fostering and the National Fostering Stocktake.

It is common sense that in order to encourage greater numbers of foster carers to stay in the profession, retainer payments are an essential element of the terms of fostering imposed upon them by their fostering service provider, whether that be the local authority or independent fostering agency. It is the prospect of no income security which is forcing foster carers into resigning, whilst at the same time preventing new foster carers from entering the profession. The actual definition of retainer in the dictionary is 'a thing that holds something in place'.

The GMB represents foster carers in all of our nine regions covering England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We have been involved in many campaigns assisting foster carers in their fight to protect their current terms. It is often publicised in the media about the fight of foster carers for workers rights and more professional respect. However, underneath these very important issues, are many foster carers desperately trying to hold on to what current terms they have.

Many people cannot afford to give up work and become a foster carer if financial security is not offered. Retainer payments should be made to enable the foster carer to continue paying the household bills so that there is a home for children looked after to come to.

One local authority actively encouraged foster carers to give up alternative paid employment to foster. It was advertised as 'Make a Living' and foster carers were paid 52 weeks per year. Obviously, compared to many other local authorities this was a better term. The local authority have now removed this term meaning that when a foster carer has no child in placement, they will receive no income. The argument used by the local authority in this case was that many foster carers were unreasonably

refusing placements due to them receiving money regardless of caring for children or not. They were effectively punishing all foster carers instead of dealing with any particular problems. The GMB asked the local authority to consider adopting a refusal policy, similar to one we were aware of in a neighbouring authority which worked well. The local authority refused and were also unable to provide us with details of how many foster carers were considered to be unreasonably refusing placements. Eventually, they admitted that this was not the real reason. They actually had big issues recruiting new foster carers and therefore said that they needed to offer more money to attract new foster carers. As a result, they increased payments slightly for those who could foster more than one child. Concerns were raised at the time that the local authority thought the issue could be resolved by offering financial incentives alone. Most foster carers stated that they were not asking for any increase on their payments, but instead wanted income security. The focus of the local authority was all about attracting new foster carers and no interest shown in the retention of the already trained and skilled foster carers.

This same local authority already had issues of foster carers with empty beds for many months, through no fault of their own. Under the new terms, these foster carers are left without an income and have been left with no other option but to resign from fostering and find alternative paid employment. The GMB informed the local authority that foster carers would have to resign if these terms were forced upon them. Their response was that they were willing to take the risk as they did not believe that they would. This statement obviously was not received well by foster carers who already felt under valued and under appreciated. There were reassurances from the local authority that their internal procedures and structures would be improved and empty beds would not continue to be an issue. However, nothing had changed up to the implementation date of the new terms.

Single carers were even more at risk, as they did not have a second income coming into the home. It is mainly single carers that have been left feeling forced to resign from fostering as a result of the removal of retainer payments. This local authority now encourages new foster carers and existing foster carers to find paid employment to complement their fostering - although the practicalities of this can be very difficult, depending on the needs of the individual child or children.

Another local authority reduced fostering terms and retainer payments several years ago. As with the previously mentioned local authority, foster carers in this area were advised to use their minimal paid annual leave entitlements in between placements. This year, that same local authority, went one step further and reduced the children's allowances. Foster carers were already spending their own money on topping up children's allowances as they aren't sufficient. These foster carers have been approached by independent fostering agencies encouraging them to switch, offering golden hand shakes and better terms which would help them address some of their financial worries over the lack of retainer payments.

How can foster carers be expected to 'save for a rainy day' with low fostering payments and children's allowances that don't actually cover the real cost of fostering?

If retainers were provided by all fostering service providers, foster carers with empty beds would be able to assist with respite care needs. Time without placements could also be used to undertake training, support other foster carers or attend recruitment

events. Foster carers are expected to be available whenever the local authority or independent fostering agency wants them - and yet they aren't offered any security for when they aren't needed. Access to retainer payments has also enabled foster carers to take time in between placements to redecorate. Sometimes when a child leaves a placement, it is necessary for the foster carer to redecorate and replace bedroom furnishings and ensure the bedroom and home are ready for the arrival of a new child. If a foster carer has no income in between placements it makes it more difficult for them to be in a position to be able to do this.

Generally, there is a lack of appreciation of the demands of the fostering role and how difficult it may be to find paid employment which fits around the needs of the child/children. Although, there are many foster carers who do have paid employment elsewhere, there are many whose full time role is that of foster carer and it would be impossible to do anything else.

GMB is currently working with Wakefield Council to implement a Fostering Friendly Policy which enables employees to take paid time off for fostering responsibilities. Once this is agreed, we hope to encourage other local authorities and companies to adopt similar ones. This would encourage some of their employees to become foster carers, helping address the recruitment crisis. It also assists in helping foster carers manage paid employment and fostering - as it appears this is the current direction of travel.

There has to be more done to address the complex issues of working as well as fostering, especially for single carers.

Why should it be that only people who are wealthy enough to not work elsewhere, or couples, can foster? This is automatically excluding a huge part of society from being foster carers.

Retainer payments are therefore an essential term if we are to address the recruitment and retention crisis that our fostering system is facing. It is cost efficient in the long term to offer financial security now.

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