

CYNGOR GWYNEDD – Report for Cyngor Gwynedd's Cabinet

Item Title:	<i>Fostering Offer for Maethu Cymru Gwynedd Foster Carers</i>
Cabinet Member:	<i>Councillor Menna Trenholme</i>
Relevant Officer:	<i>Aled Gibbard</i>
Date of Meeting:	08.04.25

1. Decision Sought:

This report describes a package of benefits for Maethu Cymru Gwynedd Foster Carers. The Cabinet is asked to approve the incentives outlined below for foster carers who are registered with the Council:

1. Allow a reduction of 50% (25% for a short break Foster Carer) in Council Tax bills of the main residence of foster carers who are registered with the Council, before considering any discounts, exemptions and/or Council Tax Reduction they are already eligible for.
2. Offer a free annual parking ticket.
3. Discounted use of leisure centres.
4. Adopt a Fostering Friendly policy for Maethu Cymru Gwynedd foster carers who are employed by the Council.

2. What is the reason why the Cabinet needs to make the decision:

- 2.1** Section 13A(1)(c) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 gives general discretionary power to billing authorities such as Cyngor Gwynedd to reduce liability for Council Tax in relation to any person, or group of people, in addition to any relevant national discounts and exemptions.
- 2.2** Section 67 of the 1992 Act lists those sections of the Act where only the Full Council can decide on them. As Section 13A(1)(c) does not appear on this list, the Cabinet can decide to grant relief under this Section.
- 2.3** Over the past few years, a number of billing authorities in Wales have decided to grant a reduction for Council Tax bills of certain foster parents, as part of a package in order to attract more people to undertake this role.
- 2.4** This issue has received attention from officers and members across several departments and portfolios. It has also been supported by the Council's Corporate Parenting Panel.

1. Introduction and Reasoning

3.1 Background / Introduction

1. Foster Carers play an important and key role for the Council, providing care within a family for children and young people who are unable to live at home with their birth family. Very often children who receive care will have experienced significant trauma and have additional needs that require very skilled and experienced parenting and support.
2. The Local Authority has a duty to ensure that a placement is made within the Local Authority's own area (Section 81(9) Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014) unless it is not reasonably practical to do so, or there are important reasons for placing the child outside the area - the main important reason would be protection.
3. The ambitious aim of the Gwynedd Placement Commissioning Strategy 2022-2027 is to provide sufficient placements to meet the individual and diverse needs of looked after children. Over the next five years we intend to reduce our reliance on commissioning residential placements and independent fostering, in accordance with the Welsh Government's Bill to eliminate profit and increase capacity internally. We have a Small Group Homes Scheme which will reduce our reliance on residential placements in the independent sector.
4. In order to keep our current carers and increase the number of foster carers needed to support the children and young people of Gwynedd, the Local Authority must compete with independent fostering agencies which, very often, offer better terms. Consequently, this report requests approval to introduce new incentives to improve the Council's offer to local authority foster carers.
5. All registered foster carers will be eligible to receive the benefits. Where a foster carer only offers short break care, they would receive a 25% Council Tax reduction.

4. Rationale and presentation for recommending the decision

1. National Fostering Framework (2018) research provided to the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) in January 2022 shows that children who live with Foster Carers in their own area are more likely to thrive and that children in local authority provision are more likely to remain in their home authority, which enables them to maintain important connections. It is therefore essential that local authorities increase local placements and reduce placements outside the area.
2. The Fostering Network's Condition Report by the Nation's Foster Care (2021) provides an insight into the quality of fostering services across the whole of Wales. One of the main findings was that Foster Carers need allowances to cover the full cost of caring for a child and a payment that reflects their value as a member of the team around the child. There must be sufficient payments to attract skilled and committed new Foster Carers.
3. The growth in this sector continues to be lower than the need that has been identified, so it is necessary to consider developing incentives to attract more inquiries and approve more people to foster in Gwynedd. The service has to compete against independent fostering organisations, as well as being consistent with other Local Authority Fostering Services.
4. Wales, and other parts of the UK, are experiencing challenges to ensure there are enough Foster Carers to meet needs. The Gwynedd Placement Commissioning Strategy, which was updated in 2024, states that there are not enough internal Foster Carers in Gwynedd to meet the demand. The number of children in foster care in North Wales has increased from one year to the next and the Fostering Network has calculated that an estimated 550 new foster parents are needed across Wales each year to keep up with demand.

5. There are currently 125 internal Foster Care households in Gwynedd, namely 70 general Foster Carers and 55 Associated Foster Carers (i.e. where the child belongs).
6. Local Authorities are in competition with Independent Fostering Agencies who recruit in the same areas and offer higher fees and allowances. There is a significant reliance on the Independent Fostering Agencies to provide foster care throughout North Wales. The use in Gwynedd has been quite constant but has not increased in terms of total. It is very difficult to recruit foster care households in general across the UK.
7. The lack of suitable foster care placements can lead to children with less complex needs being placed in residential placements, which means placing a child if there's space available rather than the ability to meet the child's needs.

8. The Fostering Offer in Gwynedd:

8.1 Council Tax Reduction

- The relief will only be available to residents who have been approved by Cyngor Gwynedd to be qualified foster carers;
- The foster carers live and are liable for Council Tax in Gwynedd;
- The level of relief allowed will be 50% of the Council Tax liability of the main or only home of the Fostering Carers before considering any discount/exemption and Council Tax Reduction that the resident, or the home, may be eligible for;
- For short break foster carers the relief allowed will be 25% of Council Tax liability.
- The relief will be granted against liability arising from 1 April 2025 onwards;
- There will be no means test for the relief, and it will not be subject to the individual circumstances of the relevant foster parent.

Based on the calculations made by the Finance Department, it is estimated that granting this relief will not cost more than £111,500 per year and is likely to cost less than this. The cost of the scheme will be borne entirely by Cyngor Gwynedd's Tax Collection Fund.

8.2 Annual Parking Ticket

Free parking pass for all Council car parks.

Very few of the Foster Carers buy an annual Parking Ticket, so there would not be a significant loss of income resulting from the proposal. The Council will need to 'pay' for a ticket but the service has agreed that this will be at 30% of the actual cost.

The maximum cost would be £4800 per year if every foster carer receives a parking ticket.

8.3 Byw'n lach

The "max" card offer is currently available which is free swimming during public sessions. This is funded through the Government's Swimming Grant.

The service has offered to provide leisure membership at a reduced price, which means unlimited use of gyms, swimming pools and classes for foster parents.

This means a monthly price of £20 (50% cheaper). The maximum likely cost of this proposal to the Council would be £13,500 per year if all foster carers chose it.

8.4 Support To Foster Policy (see Appendix 1)

This policy applies to Foster Carers who are also employees of the Council in order to reduce barriers and offer flexibility in their working arrangements in order to meet the needs of the children in their care. It applies to all Council employees with the exception of educational institutions that have delegated powers. The policy offers up to 5 extra days of special leave in a 12-month period for:

- Initial assessment and training before approval as a foster carer.
- Attendance at a panel to be approved.
- Child review meetings, annual Foster Carer review meetings and training.

A policy has been drafted by The Corporate Support Department, and if the Cabinet support the proposals in this report, the policy will then be formally adopted.

1. This package of incentives makes fostering more financially feasible for some residents and may even attract those who are currently fostering with an Independent Fostering Agency to transfer to Gwynedd. The incentives are in line with other local authorities that adopt similar strategies.
2. The intention of the package is to encourage and attract more to become Fostering Carers in Gwynedd as well as to show appreciation for the experienced and dedicated carers who are already registered with the Council. The proposal will strengthen Maethu Cymru Gwynedd' position to keep and add to the number of Maethu Cymru Gwynedd foster carers and to move in the direction of reducing independent placements in order to eliminate profit from the system.

5. Next steps

If the Cabinet decides to approve the incentives package, the policies established will be used for the entire financial year starting 1 April 2025. Modified Council Tax bills will be sent to the relevant people.

1. Allow a reduction of 50% (25% for a short break Foster Carer) in Council Tax bills of the main residence of foster carers who are registered with the Council, before considering any discounts, exemptions and/or Council Tax Reduction they are already eligible for.	£111,500
2. Offer a free annual parking ticket.	£4800
3. Discounted use of leisure centres.	£13,500
4. Adopt a Fostering Friendly policy for Maethu Cymru Gwynedd foster carers who are employed by the Council.	£0
Total	£129,800

The maximum annual cost of the package to the Council would be just over £18,000 per year. The expenditure can be justified when considering that the cost of one placement in the independent fostering sector is approximately £989 per week (£51,000 per year)

6. Statutory Officers' Comments.

6.1 Chief Finance Officer

Officers from the Finance Department have collaborated closely with the author of the report. I am supportive and satisfied that the decisions sought are reasonable under the circumstances and I have no objections to them

6.2 Monitoring Officer

Section 13A(1)(c) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 gives billing authorities such as Gwynedd Council a general discretionary power to reduce liability for Council Tax in relation to any person, or group of persons, in addition to any relevant national discounts and exemptions. This is not a Full Council decision . The Cabinet can approve the reduction. I am satisfied with the propriety of the decisions sought and that the Cabinet can adopt the recommendations.

List of Attachments:

List of Background Documents: