

December 2010 – April 2011

Overview and Scrutiny Review

**Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**

# Fostering Services Review

For further information, please contact  
Mark Grimshaw, Overview and Scrutiny  
(01270) 685680  
[mark.grimshaw@cheshireeast.gov.uk](mailto:mark.grimshaw@cheshireeast.gov.uk)

**1.0 Foreword**

**Councillor D Flude – Chairman of the Task and Finish Group**

- 1.1 Any child coming into the care system is obviously an undesirable outcome. Evidence from this and other reviews suggest the least worst result is that, where appropriate, a child be placed in a family environment – most notably in a foster placement. Considering this, this review has endeavoured to investigate whether all is being done to make sure that every Cheshire East cared for child has the opportunity to go to a Cheshire East foster placement.
- 1.2 From the onset of this review it became abundantly clear that we have some excellent staff doing some innovative work, particularly in relieving Cheshire East of some cumbersome legacy policies from Cheshire County Council which no longer are fit for purpose. However, with any service in transition there is going to be room for improvement. We hope that our recommendations can be taken on board to make these improvements, particularly around systems, processes and performance monitoring and of course, making our foster carers feel valued.
- 1.3 It must be noted that this has been a somewhat difficult review. It is a complex, multifaceted area and we only had some very short time scales for completion. With this in mind, some of the recommendations from this review suggest that further reviews 'branch off' in order to investigate important issues that this Group uncovered but did not have the time to pursue. Furthermore, I would like to draw attention to my fellow Councillors and the officers of the fostering service who often gave up their time at very short notice to make sure that this vital review was completed on time. A full list of those involved can be found in the main body of this report.
- 1.4 We commend the report to the Cabinet and request that it be given full and fair consideration.

## **2 Acknowledgements**

- 2.1 The group members would like to thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review. A full list of witnesses is given in the body of the report.
- 2.2 In particular, Members would like to thank Julie Lewis for the admirable way she guided the group through the review. Without her expertise the task would have been impossible.
- 2.4 The scrutiny support was provided by Mark Grimshaw from Overview and Scrutiny. Many thanks to Mark for his help in putting together the evidence and formatting the report.

### **3.0 Executive Summary**

- 3.1 Following previous Task and Finish groups that had focused on cared for children, it had become increasingly clear that placing a vulnerable child in a family setting was the best outcome. This review set out to discover whether this was actually the case and whether all was being done to maximise the possibility of a cared for child having that opportunity.
- 3.2 Whilst the Group are now certainly sure of the former, it became apparent that there are some areas of improvement in terms of maximising the opportunity for a cared for child to have a stable Cheshire East foster placement. This is not to say that the Group did not find any examples of excellent practice. On the contrary, every officer and carer that the Group interviewed gave the overriding impression that they were doing everything they could to provide the best service possible for our cared for children. Having said this, as with all well performing services, there is always room for improvement and the Group feel that the recommendations outlined here will assist the service in making those improvements.
- 3.3 After designing a wide-ranging and comprehensive research programme the Group's findings fell naturally into the following main themes:
- Recruitment of foster carers – including improving choice by increasing the diversity and range of placements.
  - Retention of foster carers – including support, training and payment to improve placement stability
  - Educational attainment for those in foster care
  - The health and wellbeing of children and young people in foster care
  - The successful transition of young people leaving care
  - Systems and administrative processes with the Foster Care Service.
  - Link to early intervention agenda.
- 3.4 A number of these themes do not exist in isolation from each other. Indeed, they are all part of the same issue with a number of cross-cutting and recurrent themes. For instance, an increase in the amount of foster carers recruited would result in less pressure on existing carers, reducing placement disruption and improving retention. Similarly, the work of partners in health and education plays a big part in reducing disruption and resignations.
- 3.5 On the whole, the Group would like to draw attention to the importance of improving systems and administrative processes including a robust performance monitoring programme. This was highlighted during a site visit to Stoke-on-Trent City Council in which they attributed their rapid improvements to better systems, both with internal and external bodies.

- 3.6 Similarly, it is vital that Cheshire East do more to make our foster carers feel valued – from the moment they approach the service to when they eventually retire. They need to be seen as the professionals they are and treated as such.

The full list of recommendations is below:

### **Recommendations**

- 3.7 That all staff involved in the Fostering & Adoption service be situated on a single site, where appropriate.
- 3.8 That in line with the corporate parenting strategy, all corporate policies must consider their impact on cared for children.
- 3.9 That consideration be given to a renewed focus on recruitment and assessment of mainstream foster carers in order to ensure that Cheshire East Council meets its sufficiency requirements.
- 3.10 That Cheshire East continues to provide support and resources for the recruitment of foster carers.
- 3.11 That the process from initial expression of interest to approval by panel be given a speedy, yet achievable timescale from which clear milestones are communicated to both prospective carers and staff throughout the development of the application.
- 3.12 That prospective carers moving through the application process be paired with an experienced carer as a mentor.
- 3.13 That an investigation be carried out to assess the viability of creating a budget to enable Cheshire East to pay commercial mortgage rates for home modifications in order to allow prospective carers take on their first or additional placements.
- 3.14 That the information from placement request forms in terms of demand in particular placements be made available to the recruitment officer to inform the marketing strategy.
- 3.15 That 'disruption meetings' along the lines of the Stoke-on-Trent model be held with foster placements that have been identified as being at risk of disruption.
- 3.16 That experienced foster carers be used in delivering training sessions or work shops to make best use of their professional skills.
- 3.17 That a budget be made available for the service to either purchase a small library of publications from the Safer Foster Carer Network for the use of foster carers or to explore web-based training opportunities.

- 3.18 That training be provided for the safe handling of Children in Care.
- 3.19 That financial support be maintained for carers attending training events.
- 3.20 That support and resources for the Cared For Children's Support Team be maintained.
- 3.21 That the possibility of making links with Cheshire East Leisure Facilities under the auspices of the Corporate Parenting Strategy be investigated to provide respite breaks using the same principles of the Dreamwall project. Within this, that the possibility of reciprocal relationships with adjacent authorities be explored in terms of respite facilities – particularly for Cheshire East children placed out-of-Borough.
- 3.22 That Cheshire East formalises the on-going support that foster carers provide for themselves in partnership with appropriate fostering networks.
- 3.23 That the possibility of links being made with the family support service to assist with out-of-hours support for foster carers be investigated. In addition, that the service explore the possibility of commissioning an out-of-hours support line.
- 3.24 That the awards night be continued, currently undertaken by the Cheshire Foster Carer Association, to recognise the achievements of our Children in Care and the contributions of our foster carers.
- 3.25 That foster carers be provided with the contact details of their local Councillors.
- 3.26 That a 'starter pack' be produced for each new placement which provides the requisite information about the child/young person with a small, flexible budget.
- 3.27 That support and resources for the Virtual School be maintained including the Personal Educational Allowance, Education Support Fund and educational psychologists.
- 3.28 That a comprehensive register of the appropriateness of out-of-Borough educational settings is compiled with a rigorous quality assurance programme put in place to monitor it.
- 3.29 That the Virtual School provides training to teachers so that they provide an appropriate level of support for Cared for Children and assist in any transitional processes between settings.
- 3.30 That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the processes, systems and staffing issues around health and Cared for Children.

- 3.31 That a new electronic recording system be purchased to ensure seamless information sharing between children's and adult's services.
- 3.32 That links are made with Registered Social Landlords to secure decent housing for care leavers, particularly in the Macclesfield area.
- 3.33 That a fit-for-purpose facility be procured so to curtail the practice of 'sofa-surfing' and to assist in the training of young people as they prepare for independence.
- 3.34 That Cheshire East pays a retainer to Foster Carers for keeping open a placement for a young person at university.
- 3.35 That strong performance monitoring systems be put in place and embedded throughout the fostering service.
- 3.36 That exit interviews be conducted on all foster carers who resign from the service and the resulting information be analysed for trends.
- 3.37 That links are made, whenever possible, with the early intervention agenda – particularly with the SureStart programme.
- 3.38 That Cheshire East's payment rates be constantly tracked against and compared to our geographical and statistical neighbours
- 3.39 That a business case be commissioned which investigates the benefit cost ratio of investing in fostering services to reduce dependency on residential placements and IFAs.
- 3.40 That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the 16 plus service for cared for children.

## **4.0 Outline of Review**

### **4.1 Background**

Following a previous Task and Finish Review which looked at Residential Provision in Cheshire East, a recommendation was made that –

“All Cared for Children should be placed within a family setting wherever possible and that sufficient resources are targeted at the fostering service to ensure sufficient capacity is available”

As a result, the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee at a mid-point meeting on the 16 November 2010 agreed that a review which looked in more detail at the resources and capacity of the fostering services would be appropriate. In a time of austerity and difficult decisions, the Committee felt it imperative that the Borough's most vulnerable are made a priority and that the services which support them are performing optimally. The Task and Finish Group, its Membership, Chairmanship and terms of reference were all agreed and ratified at the Committee meeting on 7 December 2010.

### **4.2 Membership**

The Members of the Task and Finish Group were:

**Councillor Dorothy Flude (Chairman)**  
**Councillor David Neilson**  
**Councillor Andrew Kolker**  
**Councillor Tony Ranfield**  
**Councillor Gillian Merry**  
**Councillor Bill Livesley**

### **4.3 Terms of Reference**

- To ensure that Cheshire East has a stable fostering service
- To ensure a good match between foster carer and child.
- To create a service which is able to recognise the different levels of fostering care and one that is able to deliver a 'bespoke' service based fundamentally on assessed need.
- To make sure that Cheshire East is doing everything it can to recruit and retain foster carers
- To ensure that foster carers are sufficiently supported emotionally and financially.
- To ensure that all foster carers are trained with the relevant and necessary skills
- To improve links with other authorities to assist in supporting foster carers.
- To ensure that the fostering service aligns itself with the wider early intervention agenda to ensure a holistic system of care is achieved.



- To improve the value for money of current residential provision by following the principle of 'invest to save' by re-directing budgets towards fostering services.

## **5.0 Methodology**

### **5.1 Witnesses:**

Members met with the following people during the review:

- **Julie Lewis** – Principal Manager, Cared for Children
- **Judy Bell** – Group Manager, Fostering Services East, Cheshire Shared Services
- **Sue Ferguson** - Chair of Fostering Panel
- **Diane Grant** - Supervising Social Worker for Private Fostering
- **Sophie Almond** - Unit Co-ordinator, Fostering Duty Desk
- **Gail Holbrook** - Practice Consultant, Fostering Duty Desk
- **Stephen Kelly** - Recruitment Officer, Fostering & Adoption
- **Beverley Grainger** - Training Officer, Fostering & Adoption
- **Liz Lyne** - Practice Consultant, Panel Advisor
- **Phil Mellen** - Head of Virtual School
- **Berenice Astbury** - Designated Nurse for Cared for Children
- **Alison Mason** - Group Manager for Care Planning
- **Sheila Williams** - Designated Nurse for Cared for Children
- **Dawn Mack** - Sandbach Health Visitor
- **Karen Bowdler** - Accountant for Children's Services
- **James Treacy** - Independence Advisor, Young People
- **Colin Freeth** - Practice Consultant, Placement Team
- **Councillor Hilda Gaddum** – Portfolio Holder, Children and Family Services

### **5.2 Visits:**

- Stoke-on-Trent City Council's Fostering Service – from being in special measures in 2007 to receiving an 'Outstanding report' in 2011.
- Park Foster Care (private agency)
- Children in Care Council
- Two foster homes (one experienced and one newly approved)

### 5.3 Timeline:

Date	Meeting / Site Visit
13/12/2010	Initial Meeting to define terms of reference
14/01/2011	Briefing session
25/01/2011	Meeting with Chair of the Fostering Panel
27/01/2011	Meeting with Fostering Duty Desk
28/01/2011	Meeting with Recruitment Officer, Training Officer and Practice Consultant, Panel Advisor
04/02/2011	Meeting with Head of Virtual School, Designated Nurse for Cared for Children and Group Manager for Cared for Planning
11/02/2011	Meeting with Designated Nurse for Cared for Children and Health Visitor for Sandbach
18/02/2011	Site Visit to Stoke-on-Trent City Council's fostering service
21/02/2011	Site Visit to Park Foster Care (Private Agency)
24/02/2011	Q&A session with the Children in Care Council
25/02/2011	Catch up session with Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services.
04/03/2011	Meeting with the accountant for Children and Family Services
14/03/2011	Meeting with Practice Consultant – Placement Team
09/03/2011	Site Visit to two foster care homes
18/03/2011	Meeting with Independence Advisor – Young People
22/03/2011	Meeting with Supervising Social Worker for Private Fostering
25/03/2011	Review of Draft Report
01/04/2011	Report to finalised for submission to Children and Families Scrutiny Committee
12/04/2011	Presented to Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

## **6.0 Jargon Busting<sup>1</sup>**

### **6.1 ‘Looked after children’/‘children in care’**

- 6.1.1 The term children in care includes: all children being looked after by a local authority; those subject to a care order under section 31 of the Children Act 1989 (see below); and those looked after by a voluntary agreement with their parents under section 20 of that Act. They may be looked after by family members, foster carers or staff in a residential children’s home. Children and young people from overseas become ‘looked after’ if they have no one with parental responsibility in this country.

### **6.2 Children ‘at risk’ of harm**

- 6.2.1 These are children about whom there are concerns that they are or may be at risk of suffering harm through abuse or neglect. Children considered ‘at risk’ have a Child Protection Plan which should be regularly reviewed.

### **6.3 ‘Children in need’**

- 6.3.1 Children in need are a wider group of children and young people who have been assessed as needing the help of services to achieve a reasonable standard of health or development. They have a Child in Need Plan to address the difficulties identified in the assessment.

### **6.4 ‘Care leavers’**

- 6.4.1 Care leavers are those who have been in public care for at least 13 weeks from the age of 14 onwards and therefore qualify for services to support them once they leave. This may be at 16 or up until 24 if they remain in full-time education.

### **6.5 Care Order – Section 31 Children Act 1989**

- 6.5.1 Care Orders are made by the court if a ‘threshold of significant’ harm is reached and there is no likelihood of improvement in the standard of care provided for a young person. The local authority then shares parental responsibility with the parent(s) and can make the decisions that a parent would normally make. A Care Order expires when the young person reaches 18 (or sometimes 19) years of age, or when an Adoption Order is made and the child is permanently adopted.

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from ‘10 Questions to ask if you’re scrutinising services for looked after children’ LGI&D and CfPS

## **6.6 Interim Care Order – Section 38 Children Act 1989**

- 6.6.1 If the local authority is concerned that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer 'significant harm', they can apply to the court for an Interim Care Order, which is a time-limited order renewed while care proceedings for the child continue through the courts and other authorities.

## **6.7 Emergency Protection Order Section 44 Children Act 1989**

- 6.7.1 An Emergency Protection Order removes a child into accommodation provided by or on behalf of the local authority and is granted by the court if there is reasonable cause to believe that the child is likely to suffer significant immediate harm.

## **6.8 Children in Care Councils**

- 6.8.1 The Care Matters White Paper and the subsequent Act required local authorities to set up a Children in Care Council to enable regular, good quality dialogue and involvement in developing and delivering services. There should also be mechanisms in place for involving young people in care in the recruitment of key staff members, such as the Director of Children's Services. The local Children in Care Council will be responsible for helping develop and monitor the implementation of the Pledge to children and young people about the care they receive.

## **6.9 Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)**

### **6.10 Fostering Panel**

- 6.11 The membership and functions of Fostering Panels are laid down in the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The role of the panel is to scrutinise the assessments and reports presented by the fostering service provider to ensure that they are thorough, fair, and transparent and that the conclusions and recommendations are properly evidenced. The panel also has a quality assurance role to evaluate the quality of reports, and to comment on any area of the service which they consider relevant.