

Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Agenda

Date: Tuesday, 12th April, 2011
Time: 10.30 am
Venue: Committee Suite 1,2 & 3, Westfields, Middlewich Road,
Sandbach CW11 1HZ

The agenda is divided into 2 parts. Part 1 is taken in the presence of the public and press. Part 2 items will be considered in the absence of the public and press for the reasons indicated on the agenda and at the foot of each report.

PART 1 – MATTERS TO BE CONSIDERED WITH THE PUBLIC AND PRESS PRESENT

1. **Apologies for Absence**

To receive any apologies for absence.

2. **Minutes of Previous Meeting** (Pages 1 - 6)

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2011.

3. **Declaration of Interest/Party Whip**

To provide an opportunity for Members and Officers to declare any personal and/or prejudicial interests and for members to declare the existence of a party whip in relation to any item on the agenda.

4. **Public Speaking Time/Open Session**

For any apologies or requests for further information, or to give notice of a question to be asked by a member of the public

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A total period of 15 minutes is allocated for members of the public to make a statement(s) on any matter that falls within the remit of the Committee.

Individual members of the public may speak for up to 5 minutes, but the Chairman will decide how the period of time allocated for public speaking will be apportioned, where there are a number of speakers.

Note: In order for officers to undertake any background research, it would be helpful if members of the public notified the Scrutiny officer listed at the foot of the agenda, at least one working day before the meeting with brief details of the matter to be covered.

5. **Review of Home to School Transport** (Pages 7 - 20)

To consider a report on the Review of Home to School Transport.

6. **Children's Centre Programme Re-shaping** (Pages 21 - 34)

To consider a report on the Children's Centre Programme Re-shaping.

7. **Children and Families Complaints Procedures** (Pages 35 - 42)

To consider a report on the Children and Families Complaints Procedures.

8. **Fostering Services Task and Finish Review** (Pages 43 - 82)

To consider a report on the Fostering Services Task and Finish Review.

9. **Fees and Charges** (Pages 83 - 84)

To consider any significant changes to the schedule of fees and charges relating to the Children's and Families Service.

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**
held on Tuesday, 15th February, 2011 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor R Westwood (Chairman)
Councillor D Neilson (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors D Flude, A Kolker, W Livesley, G Merry, M Parsons, A Ranfield,
J Wray and John McCann

Apologies

Councillors T Jackson and Jill Kelly

32 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 December 2010 be approved as a correct record.

33 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

None noted.

34 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION

Mr. Fagan, a parent of a disabled child who had been using the Langley Unit as a facility for respite, attended to express his concern over the future of respite provision in Cheshire East and the future of the staff employed at the Langley Unit.

Mr. Fagan explained that the families with children involved in the Langley Unit had been told prior to Christmas 2010 that they would have replacement provision provided but it appeared that this promise had been reneged on. He therefore wanted reassurance that alternative provision would be provided for the families affected.

Cath Knowles responded by firstly making clear that the closure of the Langley Unit was a corporate decision due to health and safety issues rather than a social services decision as a result of budget cuts. It was agreed that it was very unfortunate that the Langley Unit had not been able to stay open long enough to provide an overlap whilst moves towards a personalisation agenda were completed. It was asserted that all efforts had been made to keep the facility open for as long as possible and that the service was putting together personal plans for the children and young people affected as an interim measure. Mr. Fagan was also reassured that the service was working closely with Human

Resources in attempt to retain the skilled staff based at the Langley Unit. It was also accepted that the service would work harder to communicate these key messages to all staff so that the information that parents receive would be consistent and clear.

RESOLVED – That an item on the future of alternative provision following the closure of the Langley Unit be placed on the agenda of the next meeting.

35 SAFEGUARDING

The Chairman opened the item by providing the background to the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee's relationship with the issue of Safeguarding since the formation of Cheshire East Council. It was noted that in the early days of the Council the Committee had been keen to ensure that Cheshire East were 'Laming Compliant', particularly in light of a number of high profile child protection cases that had been prominent in the media. With this in mind a number of Senior Officers had attended a meeting in which it was admitted that the systems inherited by Cheshire East had a number of shortcomings. Following from this, it was explained that consultants had been appointed to identify the gaps and make recommendations on improvements.

After seeing these reports, some of which were concerning, Members of the Committee agreed to take a hands off approach to making the requisite improvements whilst officers proceeded, with it always in mind that the Committee would revisit the topic once the newly designed systems had settled. As an aside, it was noted that a steering group had been established comprising of the Portfolio Holder, Scrutiny Chairman and Cabinet Support Member for Children's services which maintained a level of Member involvement.

Cath Knowles built on the Chairman's points by explaining that the report offered a timely opportunity to brief Members on the future of Safeguarding as the direction of travel had now become clear.

Prior to engaging with the main points of the report, it was made clear that all aspects of the new safeguarding approach had been based on independent, evidence based reviews, not on anecdotal information.

Reporting on the first major change in the new approach it was reported that there had previously been one team to which every child was allocated, regardless of need. This had meant that social workers were forced to juggle competing priorities. It was explained that with the redesign, there were now more bespoke teams, for instance those solely responsible for disabled or cared for children. This had helped to organise work streams and focus work on the child's needs.

Furthermore, attention was drawn to the newly formed Children's Assessment team which had replaced the Access team. It was explained how the establishment of this team had meant that assessments were now being done in a more timely way and that signposting had improved greatly. This had helped make the child's journey more seamless and improved continuity.

Cath Knowles continued to report that although these new systems had only been in place for a short amount of time, Cheshire East had already begun to see the benefit. For instance, it was noted that Cheshire East had received positive

reports in a number of areas and it was explained that the safeguarding aspect was vital in achieving a good review. Additionally, the supervision toolkit that Cheshire East had developed was getting a lot of interest from other authorities as an example of best practice.

In responding to the report, the Committee as a whole noted the considerable progress had been made and wished to congratulate the service on the results they had achieved.

A query was made by John McCann regarding referral training and whether this had yet to start. It was noted that there was referral training in place with the focus of this being to give staff the confidence to manage risk rather than constantly making referrals.

A question was asked about the precise role of a 'practice consultant'. It was explained that this position was based around the 'Hackney Model' in which it was deemed important to enable social workers when they became managers of their unit to continue to practice – facilitating a link between strategy and practice.

A query was raised over whether the service was still recruiting social workers. It was confirmed that the service was still recruiting and this was with the aim of reducing the caseload of social workers to 15-20 rather than the current situation of 20-25.

As a final point, the Chairman drew attention to the virtual school and commented that this appeared to be an interesting idea that the Committee would benefit from hearing more about. It was suggested therefore that the Virtual Head attend a subsequent meeting of the Committee.

With reference to the action plan, provided as an appendix, the Committee wished to note that they were pleased with the clarity of the plan.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee note the report and the improvements that have been put in place within Children's Services as part of the ongoing overall improvement plan with the aim to ensure Cheshire East children and young people remain safe and have opportunities to achieve.
- b) That the Committee note the improvements made within the Unannounced Inspection Action Plan.
- c) That the Virtual Head attend a subsequent meeting to brief the Committee on his role.

36 CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY

At a mid-point meeting of the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee held on 20 January 2011, Julie Lewis attended to brief Members on the newly devised corporate parenting strategy. Within this brief a number of aspects such as the 'pledge', the 'principles' and the measures of success had been outlined.

Since that point, it was reported that the draft version of the strategy had been circulated to all officers as a consultation document and that it was due to be presented to corporate management team on 21 February 2011.

Considering the importance of the strategy, Members wished to have an opportunity to ask any further questions that they had after having more time to review its content.

Firstly, Councillor Flude questioned how the service intended to make sure that 'the pledge' would be published in an appropriate manner so that children and young people could understand it. It was confirmed that work was being carried out with Barnardos to structure the pledge so that it was clear for all audiences and that this would then be distributed to all children when they enter care.

Secondly, Councillor Neilson when reviewing 'the principles' had noticed that there was no mention of cared for children having a right to appropriate equipment, something that had been earmarked in the review of Residential Provision. Additionally, it was noted that there was no mention of kinship carers within the strategy. It was asserted that these issues would be looked at.

Thirdly, Councillor Kolker suggested that within the 'local indicators for Cheshire East' section, there could possibly be an indicator which measured the number of disruptions in fostering and adoption placements. Again, it was said that this was something that would be considered when drafting the final strategy.

Finally, a point was made from the Chairman regarding education and cared for children. In his mind, this was the most important aspect for improving the life chances of children in care and that it was vital that when placements are made, this should be considered. It was reported that the new structure outlined in the safeguarding report would greatly improve this.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Committee endorse the strategy at this juncture and look forward to reviewing the final version at a subsequent meeting.
- b) That the following issues be considered in the drafting of the final version:
 - The 'right to appropriate equipment' be added to 'the principles'
 - The role of kinship carers be considered as part of the strategy.
 - An indicator regarding disruption of foster and adoption placements be included within the 'local indicators for Cheshire East' section.

37 COUNCILLOR ENGAGEMENT INTO SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEMS

With reference to the earlier item regarding 'Safeguarding', it had been suggested that as the new structures and systems had been formulated, it would appropriate in the new civic year for Members to engage themselves in these systems to monitor their efficacy. In particular, Members had expressed a desire and interest

in observing the Social Care Services to enable them to gain even more understanding and insight into the child's journey through the statutory process.

Cath Knowles outlined how such a process could be managed:

- A strategy discussion in respect of s47
- A legal gate keeping meeting where there is a potential for children to be placed in care.
- Shadowing/observing staff in the new Children's Assessment Team
- Observing an Initial Child Protection Case Conference
- Observing a Core Group Meeting
- Shadowing/observing staff in the Child in Need/Child Protection Team
- Shadowing/observing staff in the Safeguarding Unit.
- Observing the LSCB in action, including an opportunity to meet the Chair
- Opportunity to follow a child's journey through the various stages of the statutory process.

Furthermore, it was explained how at any given time during this observation Members would have an opportunity to ask further questions/challenge processes through an agreed protocol, which would ultimately assist Members in gaining an overall sense of the experience of how statutory intervention was managed.

RESOLVED – That the Committee favour the approach outlined and in the new civic year would take up the proposal.

38 **WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Committee considered the items in the 2011 Work Programme.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the Work Programme be received and noted
- b) That the following be added as items to consider:
 - A report on the short (interim), medium and long term options for alternative provision following the closure of the Langley Unit.
 - The possibility of a Task and Finish Review of the Adoption Service
 - The attendance of the Virtual Head to explain the role and remit of his team.

39 **FORWARD PLAN - EXTRACTS**

The Committee gave consideration to the extracts of the forward plan which fell within the remit of the Committee.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the forward plan be noted
- b) That the items regarding 'Whole System Commissioning' and 'Learning outside the Classroom' be considered at a later date following the Cabinet decision.
- c) That the item regarding 'Determination of Admission Arrangements for September 2012 and subsequent years' be considered at the mid point meeting due to be held on 15 March 2011.

40 CONSULTATIONS FROM CABINET

There were no consultation from Cabinet.

The meeting commenced at 10.35 am and concluded at 12.40 pm

Councillor R Westwood (Chairman)

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 12th April 2011
Report of: Lorraine Butcher, Director of Children's Services
Subject/Title: Home to School Transport Review
Portfolio Holder: Councillor Hilda Gaddum

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1. This report outlines proposals to consult upon changing the services for which Cheshire East Borough Council (the Council) is legally permitted to make a charge for under the Home to School Transport Policy and the Complex and Special Needs Policy Transport Policy.
- 1.2 Section 508A onwards of the Education Act 1996 (the Act), as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006, details the Council's powers and duties to provide home to school transport. In line with the Act, the Council provides free home to school transport for 'eligible children' (see Appendix 1), which amongst others, includes pupils:
- who are registered pupils at their local school and live more than the recognised (statutory) walking distance from it, i.e. 2 miles for children of primary school age and 3 miles for secondary school age; or
 - who are from a low income family and are registered pupils at an appropriate 'qualifying secondary school' between 2 and 6 miles of the home address (or 2-15 miles for a denominational secondary school).
- 1.3 However, the pupils covered by some of the Council's current home to school transport policies can be charged for the service that they receive and it is these services that are the focus of this report.
- 1.4 A review of the Council's Home to School Transport Policy is required as a result of the tight financial framework within which all Local Authorities are now operating. As a consequence it is proposed that the Policy is reviewed and consultation undertaken in relation to the services for which a charge can be made, which are:
- Post 16 transport;
 - some denominational transport;
 - the post 16 element of the Complex and Special Needs Policy; and
 - the provision of transport for children with Medical Needs.
- 1.5 This review is undertaken as part of the wider Total Transport Project currently being developed within the Council, which is focusing on improved

organisation, operations, procedures and procurement processes, rather than on policy changes.

2.0 Decisions Requested

- 2.1 The Committee note the contents of the report that the Council should undertake consultation on ending the elements of the Home to School Transport Policy and Complex and Special Needs Transport Policy for which the Council can charge.
- 2.2 The Committee endorse, subject to any proposed changes to the policies being approved, that the Starting School (information for parents and carers) and Transferring to Secondary School (How to apply for a school place) booklets be updated, as necessary, to reflect these changes prior to publication for this Autumn's school admissions round for admissions to schools in the academic year 2012/13.
- 2.3 The Committee support the need to review the efficiency of the current home to school transport appeals process be undertaken prior to any future policy changes taking effect.
- 2.4 The Committee endorse that a separate review of transport arrangements for cared for children in foster placements travelling to/from school is undertaken.
- 2.5 The Committee considers how it wishes to respond to and receive further updates on the consultation.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 As part of the Authority's wider Passenger Transport Strategy, Children Services are required to review the provision contained within the Home to School Transport Policy and Complex Special Needs Transport Policy and the transport arrangements for cared for children in foster placements travelling to/from school. This review is required to recognise the financial constraints upon the Council.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 All

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 All

6.0 Policy Implications

- 6.1 The Home to School Transport Policy will be revised to accommodate any approved changes arising from these proposals.

- 6.2 The policy and procedures regarding home to school transport arrangements for cared for children in foster placements will be reviewed and developed.
- 6.3 The services available to young people will not be diminished, but the potential cost of accessing those services may be affected.
- 6.4 As these proposals include services for vulnerable groups, e.g. children, the disabled, economically disadvantaged families, etc., the Council will be required to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment to determine the effect of any proposals on such groups and, where possible, to enable the proposals to be modified in order to minimise that impact.
- 6.5 This assessment can be conducted during the consultation period, which will permit any modifications to the proposals to be considered prior to a final determination.
- 6.6 However, if the changes introduced by the Assessment result in material and substantive changes to a proposal or some of the proposals, the Council could be obliged to consult further.

7.0 Financial Implications (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

- 7.1 The Council spends in the region of £8.9 million on home to school transport per year, as follows:-

Transport Expenditure	Total £000s
Mainstream Home to School	4,216
Post 16 Travel	1,029
Denominational Travel	512
Medical Needs	30
Complex and Special Needs	3,944
Cared for Children & Foster place	890
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	£10,567

- 7.2 The options, if all proceed, could realise savings of £1 million over the next three years. In addition to the specific proposals outlined below, a number of efficiency savings are being proposed, such as contract re-tendering.

	Description	11/12 £000	12/13 £000	13/14 £000	Total £000
	Reductions				
1	Increase charge for existing users denominational travel based from £415 to £500 from September 2011	-23	-16 +26	+13	0
2	Increase charge new intake for denominational travel from £415 to £500 from September 2011	-37	-18 +36	+19	0
3	Withdraw denominational travel (2/3) and (1/3) from September 2012		-342	-170	-512
4	Increase charge for post 16 travel from £415 to £500 from September 2011	-37	-18 +37	+18	0
5	Withdraw post 16 mainstream travel from 2012		-255	-127	-382
6	Charge for post 16 Complex and Special Needs travel from September 2011	-43	-21	0	-64
7	Foster placement review (current spend on accessing school £400k)	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc
8	Medical withdraw current provision from 2011, review in accordance with "exception" policy	-13	-6	0	-19
9	School organisation from 2011	-4	-2	0	-6
	Total reductions	-157	-579	-247	-983

Note: The most recent possible additional cost of £200k following the withdrawal of transport for Adults, and the direct knock on impact on C&F budgets have not been reflected within these proposals.

- 7.3 These estimates are supplied only as a guide and would be subject to any limitations to changing the policy arising from for the Council's duty to provide free transport to 'eligible children' under the Education Act 1996, and the take up of assisted (but not free) transport by parents. It is not possible to estimate with any accuracy what income (take up) levels would be realised if an increase in the charge was approved, but it might be assumed that, as long as the charge continued to be competitive with the costs of car travel, and the transport provision was convenient, then take up would be fairly high.
- 7.4 However, a revised rate for denominational transport for over 16 provision for 2011/12 has not yet been proposed and the introduction of a charge for all Post 16 pupils with complex special needs would be expected to deliver revenue savings of £64,500 (this figure accounts for 20% of pupils who would be exempt from charging due to hardship).

8.0 Legal Implications:

- 8.1 The sections of the Education Act 1996 that detail the home to school transport that local authorities are entitled provide state that those authorities must make the arrangements that “... *they consider necessary to facilitate attendance at ...*” a relevant educational establishment. Therefore, all home to school transport is discretionary, but the law and the guidance stipulates how local authorities are expected to exercise that discretion in relation to some groups.
- 8.2 In particular, the Council cannot charge for home to school transport arrangements made under section 508B of the Education Act 1996, which obliges local authorities to provide ‘eligible children’ free of charge with the home to school travel arrangements that “... *they consider necessary to facilitate attendance at ...for the purpose of facilitating the child’s attendance at the relevant educational establishment ...*”;
- 8.3 ‘Eligible children’ are defined in Schedule 35B of the Education Act 1996 (Appendix 1) and can be seen as falling into three groups:
- those living within walking distance of their educational establishment, such as children with special educational needs, a disability, mobility problems or unsafe routes to their educational establishment;
 - those living outside walking distance of their educational establishment for whom no suitable alternative arrangements have been made; and
 - those children, 8 years and above, who satisfy an ‘Appropriate Condition’, along with some other criteria.
- 8.4 A charge can be made for transport arrangements made under the other relevant sections of the Education Act 1996, i.e. sections 508C to 509A, subject that charge being reasonable in the circumstances.
- 8.5 However, when determining what is reasonable, what is “necessary to facilitate attendance” or what is an appropriate educational establishment, local authorities are expected to take into account, amongst other factors, the wishes of parents. This was confirmed in the case of Regina v Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council, ex parte Schemet 1992, which dealt with a request for transport to schools outside the borough, in which Mr Justice Roch stated:

“The parent’s wishes were an important consideration but they were not the sole consideration and the education authority might conclude that they could make suitable arrangements for the child to be registered at a school closer to his home despite a conflict with the parents stated preference, provided the authority took account of that preference in reaching its conclusion”.

9.0 Risk Management

- 9.1 With particular reference to withdrawing most free denominational transport there is a high risk of challenge on the grounds of discrimination. However, as other local authorities have already adopted this approach, it is not insurmountable.
- 9.2 The withdrawal of Post 16 transport for mainstream pupils, introduction of charges for complex special needs pupils, combined with the withdrawal of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA), could result in more young people becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training).
- 9.3 Increased costs could also result in higher numbers of 'school run' journeys which would undermine the Council's environmental objectives.
- 9.4 Increases in the number of children walking longer distances to school could potentially result in more accidents or safeguarding concerns from parents, unless supported by other strategies, for example: additional school travel planning, road safety improvements or support for walking bus schemes.

10.0 Background and Options

- 10.1 The Council is required to provide home to school transport by law for certain groups of pupils, but the Council is also funding the provision of a number of other home to school transport services for pupils who do not have statutory right to free home to school transport. These services have been established over a number of years and have traditionally been provided to pupils who access schools further away than their nearest schools.

10.2. Denominational Transport:

10.2.1 Children who attend for reasons of religious belief, a denominational secondary school between 2 and 15 miles of the home address are currently entitled to assisted (but not free) transport to the designated local denominational school under the Council's policy. Transport assistance is offered subject to payment of a parental contribution to the cost of transport at a charge to be decided annually and reflecting the cost of provision. A family subsidy is also applied whereby only two statutory school age children per household will be subject to a charge. It is not a statutory requirement for the Council to provide free or assisted transport to pupils attending denominational schools for reasons of religious belief, with the exception of those families on qualifying benefits.

10.2.2 The denominational assisted transport policy was introduced in 2008 and a pupil attending a school prior to September 2008 and in receipt of free transport under the Local Authority Home to School Transport Policy for 2007, and continuing in statutory education at the same school beyond September 2008, remains entitled to free transport under the

2007 policy, until such time as a change of school takes place, they reach 16 and transport is then charged or a change of policy. However the Education Act 1996 states that wherever possible local authorities should ensure that transport arrangements are in place to support the religious or philosophical preference parents express.

10.2.3 If the Council decides to continue to subsidise, there would need to be a decision on what level of subsidy Council would wish to continue paying towards assisted transport. This would however leave in place transport support to faith schools.

10.3 Post 16 transport provision:

10.3.1 The current Cheshire East Post 16 Transport Policy statement for the Academic Year 2010-2011 makes a commitment:

- to ensure that learners of sixth form age (and for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 19-24) are able to access appropriate high quality education and training of their choice; and
- to provide support to those young people who need it most and removing transport as a barrier to participation in learning.

10.3.2 In developing the Statement, the Council had regard of its duties under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning (ASCL) Act 2009. The duties include consideration of whether there is adequate transport provision available to facilitate the attendance of further education learners and consultation with young people of sixth form age and their parents when drawing up the Transport Policy Statement. However, the provision of Post 16 transport is not a statutory requirement and is at the discretion of the Local Authority. If charges were not increased the effect would be to place even greater strain on services to more vulnerable groups as the authority faces the challenge of living within its financial means.

10.4 Post 16 Transport for Pupils with Complex Special Needs:

10.4.1 Currently students with complex special needs who continue their education after the age of 16, whether at school or college can apply for transport via the Complex Special Needs Policy. Entitlement via this Policy is reviewed annually and assisted transport for post 16 pupils with complex special needs is currently made at the Council's discretion. This provision is currently offered free of charge, but a number of other local authorities have introduced a charge for this provision.

10.5 Medical Circumstances:

10.5.1 Under the current School Transport Policy for Children of Statutory School Age, parents of pupils who live within the normal walking distance of their zoned school, but are unable to walk to it because of a medical condition, may apply for assisted transport there. The same Policy also allows for exceptional cases to be considered which are

outside the normal policy and in exceptional circumstances “*appropriate transport may be approved by Director of Children’s Services in relation to children for whom there are very exceptional personal or domestic circumstances*”.

10.5.2 The results of the Equality Impact Assessment and the Council’s obligations under the Equality Act 2010 could limit the changes that it may be possible to introduce to this aspect of the policy.

10.6 Cared for children in foster placements:

10.6.1 Transport is provided to enable access to schools and colleges. A separate review of transport arrangements will need to be undertaken.

10.7 In considering any amendments to the policy which could lead to a reduced entitlement for children to transport, case law has determined that local authorities must consult the parents of the children that are and may be affected before policy is altered. Once the policy is determined, the authority is obliged to publish it at least 6 weeks before the deadlines set for parents to lodge applications for school places in the normal admissions process.

10.8 **Options**

10.8.1 Revise the Home to School transport Policy to cover only services that the Council is required to provide free of charge and cease funding or introduce charges for all other home to school transport arrangements from September 2012 for existing and new pupils.

10.8.2 Withdraw transport to faith primary and secondary schools completely, except for those pupils who would remain ‘eligible’ for the free transport to a faith secondary school under the Education Act 1996.

10.8.3 Restrict the offer of free transport to ‘eligible children’ only and means test all other applicants for assisted transport to faith primary and secondary schools.

10.8.4 Increase the charge for Post 16 transport again for 2011-12 with a view to withdrawing completely in 2012-13.

10.8.5 Do not introduce or increase charges.

10.8.6 Remove transport provision or charge for Post 16 pupils attending special schools and colleges. (removal of provision – savings excluded from table pending legal view).

10.8.7 Streamline the Home to School Transport policy to include applications for children with medical problems to be considered under the Exceptions to Policy clause and introduce a charge.

11.0 **Access to Information.**

- 11.1 The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer.

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APPENDIX 1:

Eligible Children:

Within Walking Distance:

- Children with SENs, a disability or mobility problems – specifically those of compulsory school age, who are registered at a qualifying school which is within walking distance of their home or at a place other than a school by virtue of arrangements made in pursuance of section 19(1), whose condition or problems means that they cannot reasonably be expected to walk to their educational establishment and for whom no suitable arrangements have been made by the local authority for them to become a registered pupil at a qualifying school nearer to home.
- Children with unsafe routes – specifically those of compulsory school age, who are registered at a qualifying school which is within walking distance of their home or at a place other than a school by virtue of arrangements made in pursuance of section 19(1), who could not reasonably be expected to walk to their educational establishment given the nature of the route and for whom no suitable arrangements have been made by the local authority for them to become a registered pupil at a qualifying school nearer to their home.

Outside Walking Distance:

- Children with no suitable alternative arrangements – specifically those of compulsory school age who are registered at a qualifying school which is not within walking distance of their home or at a place other than a school by virtue of arrangements made in pursuance of section 19(1) or has been excluded but is still registered at the school although receiving education outside the school premises, for whom no suitable arrangements have been made by the local authority for boarding accommodation at or near the educational establishment or for them to become a registered pupil at a qualifying school nearer to their home.

Children Satisfying an Appropriate Condition:

- Children from 8 years, but below 11 years – specifically those are registered at a qualifying school which is more than two miles from his home or at a place other than a school by virtue of arrangements made in pursuance of section 19(1), for whom no suitable arrangements have been made by the local authority for them to become a registered pupil at a qualifying school nearer to his home and who satisfy an 'appropriate condition'.

- Children aged 11 years or more – specifically those who are registered at a qualifying school which is more than two miles, but not more than six miles, from his home or at a place other than a school by virtue of arrangements made in pursuance of section 19(1), who do not have access to three or more suitable qualifying schools nearer to their home and satisfy an ‘appropriate condition’.
- Children aged 11 years or more – specifically those who are registered at a qualifying school which is more than two miles, but not more than fifteen miles, from their home and whose parent has expressed a wish, based upon their religion or belief, for the child to be provided with education at that school, there is no suitable qualifying school having regard to their religion or belief that is nearer to the child's home and satisfy an ‘appropriate condition’.

An ‘APPROPRIATE CONDITION’ is satisfied if:

- (i) the child falls within section 512ZB(4) of the Education Act 1996, i.e. they are entitled to free school lunches and milk; or
 - (ii) a parent of the child, with whom the child is ordinarily resident, is a person to whom the maximum rate of working tax credit is awarded, either individually or jointly.
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APPENDIX 2:**Proposed Home to School Transport Consultation and Implementation Timetable**

DATE	ACTION
17 February	SMT agrees proposal paper
By 10 March 2011	Portfolio holder permission to consult
5 days later (15th March)	Call in period ends
	Draft letters to parents
	Questionnaire
	Website
	Set up venues
By 18 March	Consultation Papers published for 6 weeks
End of March	Public consultation events
	CEAPH
	CEASH
	CEASSH
	Schools Forum
	Schools Bulletin
	Develop questionnaire
	Develop Survey monkey
	Set up website
	Equality Impact Assessment
By 29 April 2011	Public Consultation Closes
31 May	Children and Families Scrutiny Committee
6 June	Cabinet Decision on proposals
13 June	Call in period ends
15 June	Deadline for schools booklet production
End of June 2011	Schools Booklet published
September 2011	First charges made, if agreed
September 2012	All changes implemented

******This timetable does not include an additional consultation, which may or may not be necessary, depending upon whether there are any material and substantial changes to the proposals.

Communication Strategy

- Schools Bulletin
- CEAPH
- CEASH
- CEASSH
- Schools Forum
- Staff Bulletin
- Team Talk

- Cheshire News
- Press Release
- Website
- FIS

Proposed Consultees

A copy of the consultation document should be sent to the following:

- All parents of children resident in Cheshire East currently receiving free or subsidised transport to denominational schools (including the parents of pupils due to join Year 7 at a denominational secondary school in September 2011 and who are eligible under the current policy for subsidised transport)
- All parents of children in Year 5 of denominational primary schools resident in Cheshire East who would be due to enter secondary school in September 2012.
- The Diocesan authorities
- All headteachers and governing bodies of Cheshire East maintained primary, secondary and special schools, (including denominational schools)
- All headteachers and governing bodies of denominational schools in neighbouring authorities where there are children resident in Cheshire East attending currently
- Academies
- All Cheshire East Elected Members
- Neighbouring local authorities' Directors of Children's Services
- Members of the youth parliament
- Colleges of Further Education
- Unions and Professional Associations

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CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting:	12 April 2011
Report of:	Lorraine Butcher, Director of Children's Services
Subject/Title:	Children's Centre Programme Re-shaping
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Hilda Gaddum

1.0 Report Summary

1.1 This report:

- provides a brief background to the children's centre programme
- outlines the proposals and reasons for re-shaping the programme
- summarises the outcome of the consultation that has taken place during February and March

2.0 Decision Requested

- 2.1 Members note the contents of report outlining the proposed changes to the children's centre programme which will result in a reduction in the number of designated centres from 19 to 13, with no changes to services for children and no impact on families. The proposals are detailed in Appendix 1.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 To ensure that the children's centre programme delivers value for money, makes best use of limited resources and remains sustainable in the medium term.

4.0 Wards Affected

All

5.0 Local Ward Members

All

6.0 Policy Implications including

- 6.1 The Coalition Government has set out its continued commitment to Sure Start children's centres recognising their crucial role in early intervention by ensuring that families get help early thereby helping to prevent costly problems from emerging later on. This commitment is endorsed by a number of recently commissioned government reviews¹ which place an increased emphasis on early intervention, particularly the first three years of life.
(¹ Graham Allen, Frank Field, Eileen Monroe)
- 6.2 The Government wants the network of children's centres to be retained but focused much more effectively on those families who need them most. They see children's centres as part of the local system of universal children's services; a key mechanism for improving outcomes and reducing inequalities between the poorest children and their peers. The Government also wants to allow LAs a greater degree of flexibility to determine local provision but within the context of their statutory duties.
- 6.3 Within this context, the children's centre programme in Cheshire East has been reviewed to ensure that it is best placed to respond to the opportunities and challenges ahead and that it continues to deliver effective, high quality, value for money services.

7.0 Financial Implications (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

All costs are contained within the budget for the Children and Families Directorate.

8.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

- 8.1 Local Authorities continue to have duties under the Childcare Act 2006 to make sufficient provision of children's centres to meet local need and to consult before making any significant changes. However, what determines sufficiency and the appropriate level of consultation are not prescribed; they are for the LA to determine.
- 8.2 The proposed changes do not represent a significant change to the services provided as outlined in the statutory guidance. On this basis, the consultation process has been proportionate to the level of change. This is outlined in Appendix 1 and a summary of the consultation feedback is detailed in Appendix 2.

9.0 Risk Management

- 9.1 Four of the six centres being merged are a 'virtual' model which is a more challenging service delivery model to deliver, particularly in relation to the expectations that the Ofsted inspection framework place

on children's centres. Removing these centres and linking them to another phase 2 centre removes the risk of receiving a poor Ofsted outcome and makes better use of resources, supporting longer term sustainability.

10.0 Background and Options

- 10.1 The programme of 19 centres will be re-shaped and some children's centre footprints will be merged resulting in a reduction of 'designated' centres to 13. The re-shaped footprints are detailed in Appendices 3 and 4.

11.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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APPENDIX 1

Children's Centre Programme Re-shaping

Summary of Proposals, Impact and Consultation Process

1.0 Proposals

1.1 The programme of 19 centres will be re-shaped and some children's centre footprints will be merged resulting in a reduction of 'designated' centres to 13. Whilst only 6 centres are directly affected by these proposals, all footprints have been re-shaped to some degree to improve the alignment with the Local Area Partnerships (LAPs) and the new GP Consortia. The proposed re-shaping is summarised below. The merging of centres will not result in any change or reduction to services. Most importantly, the changes will have no impact on children or families; they will be able to continue to access needs led services from the same venues they currently use.

Proposals for merging centres:

Knutsford and Wilmslow Locality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wilmslow and Alderley Edge CC to merge with Oakenclough CC
Macclesfield Locality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Henbury, Prestbury & Upton CC to merge with Broken Cross CC
Congleton Locality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alsager CC to merge with Sandbach CC
Crewe and Nantwich Locality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shavington CC to merge with Pebble Brook CC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mablins Lane CC to merge with Underwood West CC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nantwich Rural CC to merge with Nantwich CC

2.0 Impact

Service delivery - these changes will have no impact on service delivery which will continue across all footprints in line with need.

Staffing - whilst the staffing structure has been altered slightly to accommodate the changes (admin posts only), no member of staff will lose their job.

Accommodation - the merged centres will still continue to use the sites previously designated as a children's centre along with other outreach bases across the re-shaped footprints. The Mabllins Lane and Shavington sites will continue to be used for the delivery of services for children and families, including the recently re-located Child Development Service.

Children and Families – most importantly children and families should notice no changes to the services on offer. The footprints may change, but families can still choose to access services in the places that they are currently offered and delivered by the staff who are currently in post. As the children's services redesign is implemented, it is hoped that children's centre staff will be joined more and more by colleagues in other agencies and that the children's workforce will continue to deliver accessible services to families using a wide range of locations.

Footprints - the footprints have been re-shaped to reflect the merging of designated centres. This has resulted in some very large footprints, bigger than the recommended 800-1200 children under five. However, the footprint is a nominal 'reach' area for planning and data collection purposes and does not impact on service delivery or staffing models and it does not determine where families go to access services.

3.0 Benefits

3.1 The previous focus was as much on the number of buildings and designated centres as it was on service delivery. For a large, mainly rural authority, meeting the targets for the number of designated centres was always a significant challenge resulting in some 'virtual' models that were not our preferred option.

This re-shaped model:

- Delivers a more sustainable, future proof service
- Allows a greater focus on service co-ordination, delivery and locality working
- Provides improved value for money by making better use of resources and removing some operational management and admin costs
- Continues to make best use of significant capital investment made at Shavington and Mabllins Lane
- Provides an opportunity to re-shape footprints so that they align better with LAPs and GP Consortia

4.0 Consultation – process and progress

4.1 The Local Authority has a duty to consult on any changes it proposes to make to children's centre services, bearing in mind the key requirements set out in the Statutory Guidance:

- All *significant* changes must be consulted on but 'significant' is not defined; this is for the LA to determine

- Consultation must be proportionate to the level and impact of the changes
- There is a presumption against closure but 'this is not intended to restrict local authorities in making necessary changes, to forward plan and reshape services for the future'
- There is a requirement 'to make sufficient provision of children's centres to meet local need' – however, the level of sufficiency is to be determined by the Local Authority

4.2 Having consulted the Statutory Guidance, and bearing in mind the above key points, the conclusion reached is that the proposed re-shaping is not a significant change. The following consultation proposals are made on the basis of that assessment.

4.3 **Consultation** - to take place in February and March and to involve the following groups:

- Children's Centres Advisory Boards
- Children's Centres Parent Forums
- Children's Centre Staff
- Integrated Programme Board
- SMT
- Lead Member for Children's Services

4.4 **Timescale** - the proposal is to implement the changes as soon as possible following the consultation period (assuming there is support for the proposals) and CEC approval, ideally from April 2011.

4.5 Consultation is currently underway and to date, there has been a high level of support for the proposals. The only issue emerging, which was fully expected, is the need to re-name some centres; this is causing some interesting and lively debate.

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APPENDIX 2

Children's Centres Programme Re-shaping

Consultation Process

Consultation has been undertaken across all 19 children's centres using a variety of methods including:

- Briefing and feedback session with each Advisory Board
- Briefing and feedback session with Parent/carer forums
- Face to face consultation with families who attend activities at the centres during the consultation period by children's centre staff
- Display at each children's centre outlining the changes and asking for feedback
- Briefing of Lead Health Visitors at their regular team meeting
- Direct contact with parents registered at the centre via email/letter
- Two briefings for Children and Families SMT (29.09.10, 26.01.11)
- Briefing for Integrated programme Board (17.03.11)

Summary of Consultation Feedback

There has been widespread support for the proposed changes and a consensus view that the changes make sense. Furthermore, there has been support for and acknowledgement of the continued commitment to needs led service delivery across a wide range of venues and locations.

The only issue that had caused some discussion and debate is what the merged centres should be called. It is proposed that further time is allowed for each local area to find a name that all parties can agree on.

In some areas, small tweaks to the proposed footprints have been suggested. In all these changes have been accommodated.

Some questions have been asked about the larger footprints but reassurance has been given that the footprint is only really for data collection purposes and that the staffing model remains the same and will continue to support outreach, needs led services in the same way that it does now.

The following consultation events were held across the children's centres during February and March 2011.

Children's Centre	Meeting	Date
Sandbach/Alsager	Advisory Board	18/02/2011
Mablins	Advisory Board	25/03/2011
	Special meeting focus on consultation	07/03/2011
	Parents Evening	15/03/2011
Congleton	Advisory Board	23/03/2011
Middlewich and Holmes Chapel	Advisory Board	28/01/2011
Monks Coppenhall	Advisory Board	22/03/2011
Nantwich	Advisory Board	08/03/2011
& Nantwich Rural	Parent Forum	04/03/2011
Pebble Brook	Advisory	15th March
	Parent Forum	25/02/2011
Shavington	Advisory Board	03/03/2011
	Parent Forum	10/02/2011
Underwood West	Advisory board	03/03/2011
	Parent Forum	02/03/2011
Ash Grove	Advisory Board	17/02/2011
	Parent Forum	25/01/2011 during stay and play
Broken Cross	Advisory Board	10/03/2011
& Henbury, Prestbury & Upton	Parent Forums	End of the weekly stay and play session
Hurdsfield	Advisory Board	16/03/2011
	Parent Forum	Via Advisory Board and groups
Knutsford	Advisory Board	16/03/2011
	Parent Forum	26/01/2011
Oakenclough	Advisory Board	01/03/2011
	Parents Matters	18/02/2011
Poynton	Advisory Board	06/04/2011
	Parents Group	13/01/2011
Wilmslow and Alderley Edge		Covered by Oakenclough

Revised Children's Centre Footprints Following Re-structuring

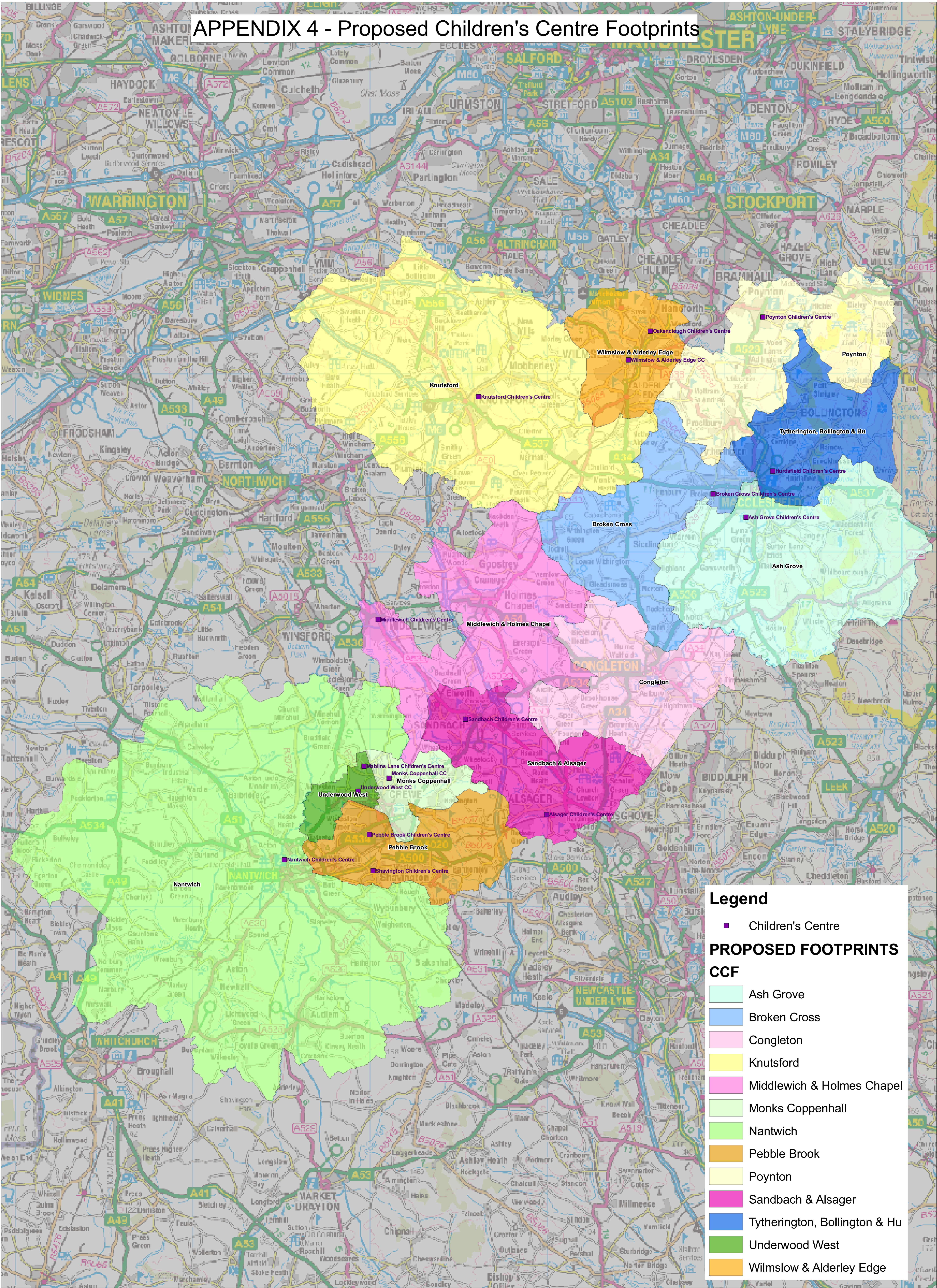
APPENDIX 3

No	CHILDREN'S CENTRE FOOTPRINT MERGERS*	0-4 Yr Old Children within 0 - 10% GEN IMD 2007	0-4 Yr Old Children within 10.01 - 30% GEN IMD 2008	0-4 Yr Old Children within 30.01 - 50% GEN IMD 2009	0-4 Yr Old Children within 50.01 - 100% GEN IMD 2007	TOTAL CCF 2008 0-4 CHILD POPULATION
1	Ash Grove	0	320	330	540	1190
2	* Broken Cross/Henbury/Prestbury & Upton	0	90	370	850	1310
3	Congleton	0	140	400	1060	1600
4	Knutsford	0	110	70	1170	1350
5	Middlewich & Holmes Chapel	0	0	90	1330	1420
6	Monks Coppenhall	0	520	80	560	1160
7	* Nantwich/Nantwich Rural	0	100	190	1670	1960
8	* Pebble Brook/Shavington	0	340	710	1020	2070
9	Poynton	0	0	0	1030	1030
10	* Sandbach & Alsager	0	0	170	1610	1780
11	Hurdsfield	0	100	130	1030	1260
12	* Underwood West/Mablins Lane	540	490	230	590	1850
13	* Oakenclough/Wilmslow and Alderley Edge	0	220	80	1700	2000
						19980

* these centre/footprint names may change

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APPENDIX 4 - Proposed Children's Centre Footprints



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COMPLAINTS REPORT

Introduction

This report presents information collected from April 2009 to January 2011. Part of the report is presented using bar charts (See appendix A).

Summary

Over the report period there have been 75 complaints. The majority 12 (16%) of these were related to issues being managed by the MCN team in Macclesfield. The second largest was CF3 11 (14%), based in Congleton. Fostering and Adoption East is 9 (12%); it should be noted that the data base reflects the old structure and does not reflect the current teams in the new structure. However, when you look at the way the teams were organised it appears that there were more complaints from the Macclesfield/Congleton area than the Crewe area. It should not be assumed that this reflects a lower quality of service across the Macclesfield/Congleton area.

There are several possible explanations including, people in that area having higher expectations, people being more assertive about their rights, teams giving out more complaints forms etc. It has also emerged that some teams have, in the past, dealt with complaints without having them formally logged as stage 1 complaints. Without further research only limited conclusions can be drawn from this data.

The chart showing complaints by month received (See Appendix 1, [Graph 2](#)), shows that there will be an increase over the last period from April 2011. This does not include appeals by parents against decisions to limit Direct Payments. These issues have been channelled through the management hierarchy and have been resolved outside of the complaints process. There have been a number of recent complaints around the issue of Short Breaks, partly reflecting the proposal to close Priors Hill Short Breaks resource. Other issues raised by complaints include, arrangements around contact, the content of assessments, the way in which an investigation was undertaken and the way in which decisions have been communicated.

Age and gender

The largest group involved children between the ages of 11 and 15. There were 23. The majority, 14, involved boys. (See Appendix 1, [Graph 3](#)).

Who complained

38 (50.7%) were parents. Few complaints were received from young people themselves. One of the aims for the Children's complaints manager is to make the complaints system more Child friendly. (See Appendix 1, [Graph 4](#)).

Stage 1

- 59 (78.7%) completed at Stage 1
- 32 (54.2%) completed within timescale
- 27 (45.8%) over timescale

We need to improve the response times to complaints at stage 1. Currently any complaint going over the timescale has the right to go straight to Stage 2. It has been agreed that Consultant Practitioners will, in future, undertake the investigation role at Stage 1 rather than the Group Managers, which is common at present. To facilitate this shift it has been considered that Consultant Practitioners should have training on this area.

The Department has now introduced the opportunity for the complainant to meet with a Senior Manager before moving to Stage 2. However, initial feedback would indicate that this meeting has not been successful in diverting complainants away from pursuing the complaint at Stage 2. Due to the small size of the sample only limited conclusions can be drawn, at this time. (See Appendix 1, [Graph 5](#)).

Complaints escalated to Stage 2

- 14 (18.7%) at Stage 2
- 7 (50%) resolved at Stage 2
- 3 ongoing
- 1 suspended
- 2 with CK for management response
- 1 going to stage 3

Most complaints were resolved at Stage 1. Out of those going to Stage 2 most were resolved without further escalation. It has been agreed that in future Group Managers will undertake the Investigation role in the Stage 2 process. Currently, this is undertaken by an “Independent Person” who is paid by the Department. To enable this transition there will need to be a programme of training for Group Managers. There may also be an issue about their capacity to do this work, which may have to be addressed.

The “Independent Person” role would be retained and continue to have to be commissioned independently. This is a legal requirement. (See Appendix 1, [Graph 6](#)).

Stage 3

- 1 at Stage 3
- 1 with the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO).

A small number of complaints go on to Stage 3. In some areas the Stage 3 Panel is chaired by an Independent Person, but the 2 supporting members are volunteers.

Currently the Panel is made of 3, paid, Independent People. The volunteer member system could be introduced across Cheshire East. However, it would raise recruitment and training issues. (See Appendix 1, [Graph 7](#)).

Complaint by first (main) category

“Other” was the largest group followed by “Complaint about a Staff Member”. One of the common themes appears to be around communication. Complainants feeling that they have not been listened to or not been treated with, what they would consider as the appropriate level of sensitivity. Further to this, the changes in structure have resulted in established workers moving around and Agency workers coming and going. From a User point of view this can lead to frustrations and a feeling of disempowerment. (See Appendix 1, [Graph 8](#)). To understand the ‘other’ category, further analysis would have to be undertaken.

Compliments

- Total 17
- 11 (64.7%) Poolswood Children with Disability Team

The Department receives more Children's complaints than it does compliments. However, in my experience, Users can make compliments, but the worker does not always pass them on to be recorded on the database. Interestingly, over the past couple of months I have noticed an improved response from some teams. Whilst I am sure the Department could improve the way it acknowledges the performance of workers receiving compliments, it should also be recognised that in challenging Child Care work, good work might not always result in a compliment. (See Appendix 1, [Graph 9](#)).

Conclusions

The Children's complaints system is a statutory requirement for all Children's Social Care services. It will be subject to OFSTED inspection to ensure it is meeting standards and requirements. Cheshire East has an established system, but there are areas for development and improvement. It is clear that there are issues for staff awareness and training. It also needs to be recognised that with the internet and other improved communication systems running alongside potential service changes, the Department should predict that the number of complaints received is likely to increase. On a more positive note, an increase in complaints may reflect a growing awareness of the complaints process and increased accessibility. The feedback from complaints, comments and compliments, can be used constructively to make service improvements and inform strategic decisions. The Children's complaints manager attends the monthly senior management meeting (IDT) and the monthly Group Manager meeting. This should facilitate feedback of issues. Research indicates that high performing organisations value and encourage feedback from their customers/service users.

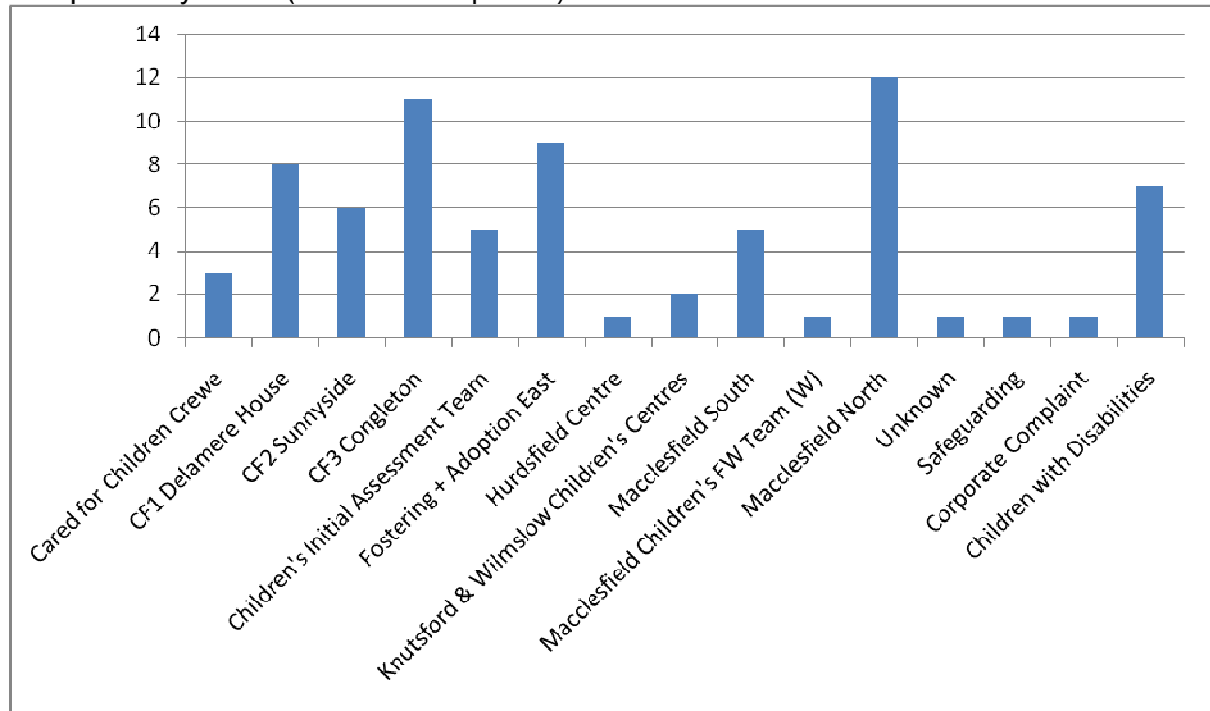
Recommendations

- Training for all workers across Children's Social Care in handling complaints.
- Training for Consultant Practitioners on Stage 1 investigations
- Training for Group Managers around undertaking stage 2 investigations
- Development of complaints information for young people.
- Updating of the complaints data base so it reflects the current structure and requirements.
- Recruitment and training of volunteers to sit on stage 3 panels

Appendix 1

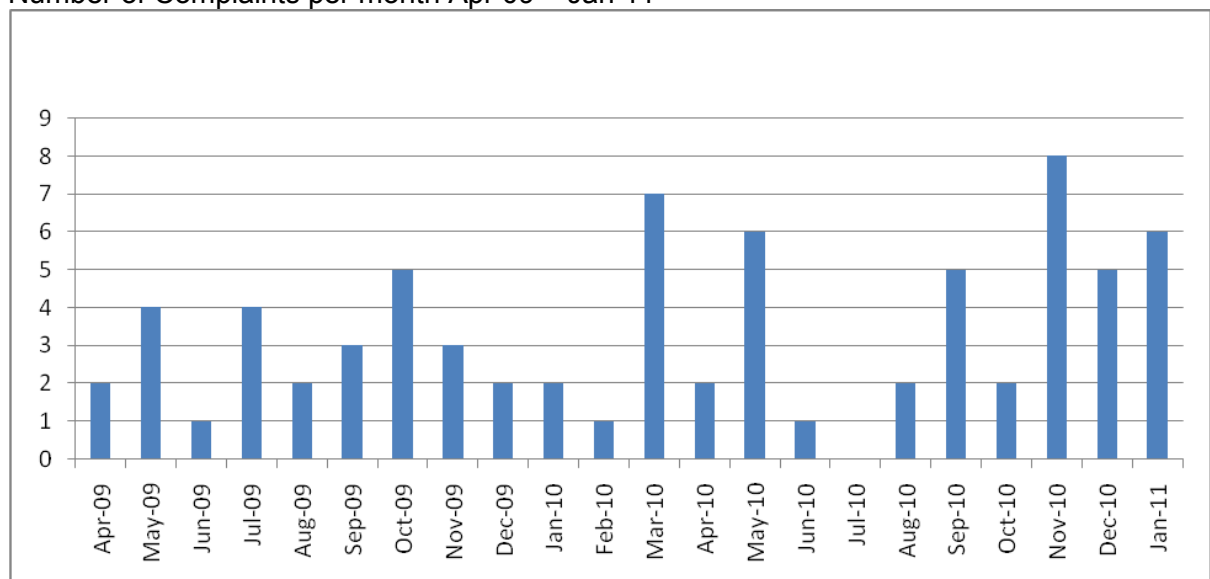
Graph 1

Complaints by Team (Total 75 Complaints)



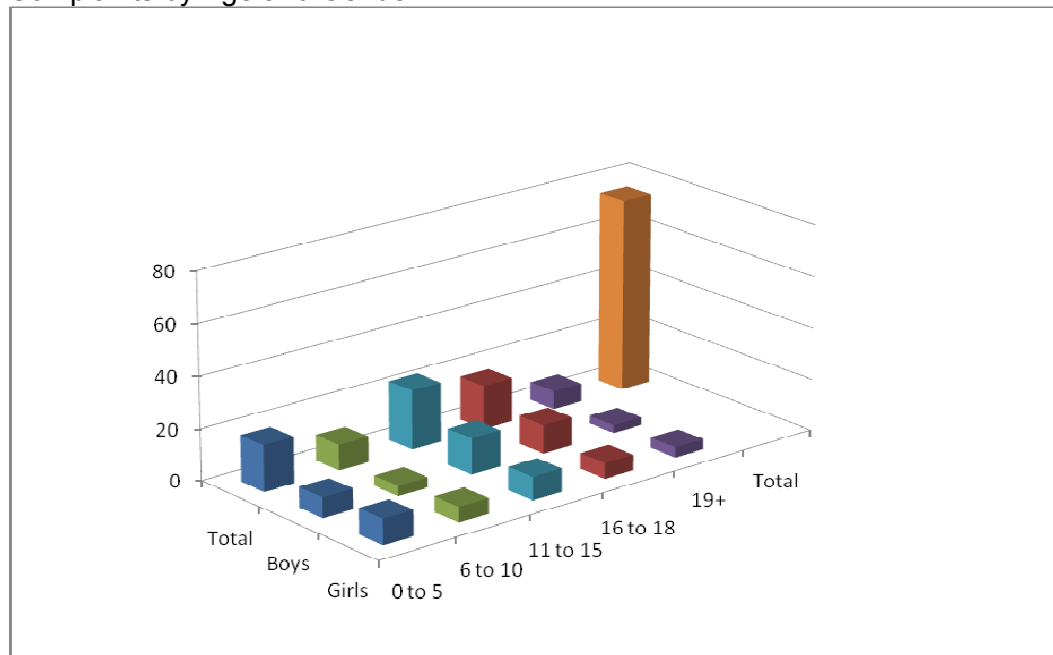
Graph 2

Number of Complaints per month Apr 09 – Jan 11



Graph 3

Complaints by Age and Gender

**Complaints by Gender:**

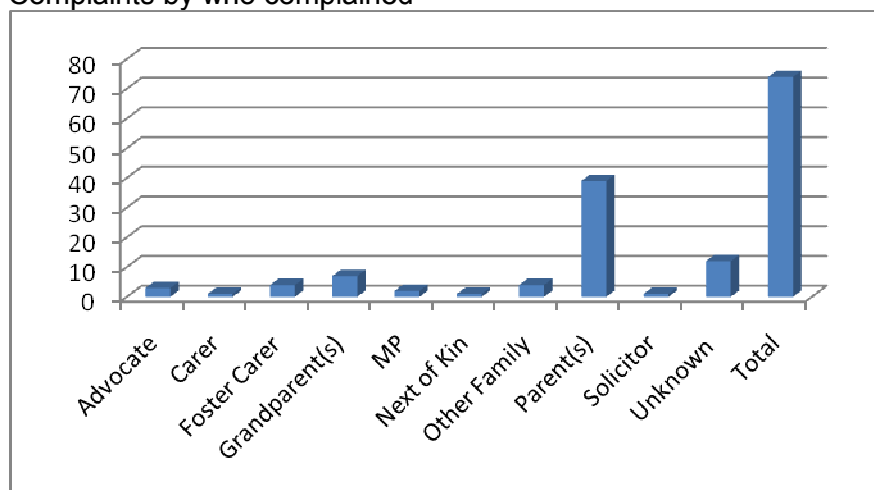
Boys	40
Girls	35

Complaints by Age Group:

0 to 5	18	of which	8	boys	10	girls
6 to 10	10	of which	4	boys	6	girls
11 to 15	23	of which	14	boys	9	girls
16 to 18	17	of which	11	boys	6	girls
19+	7	of which	3	boys	4	girls
Total	75					

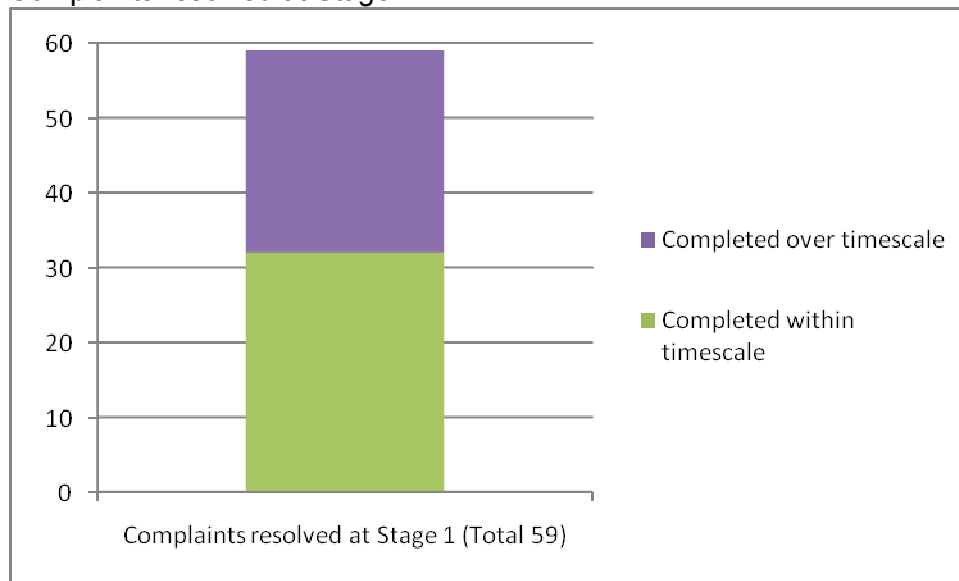
Graph 4

Complaints by who complained



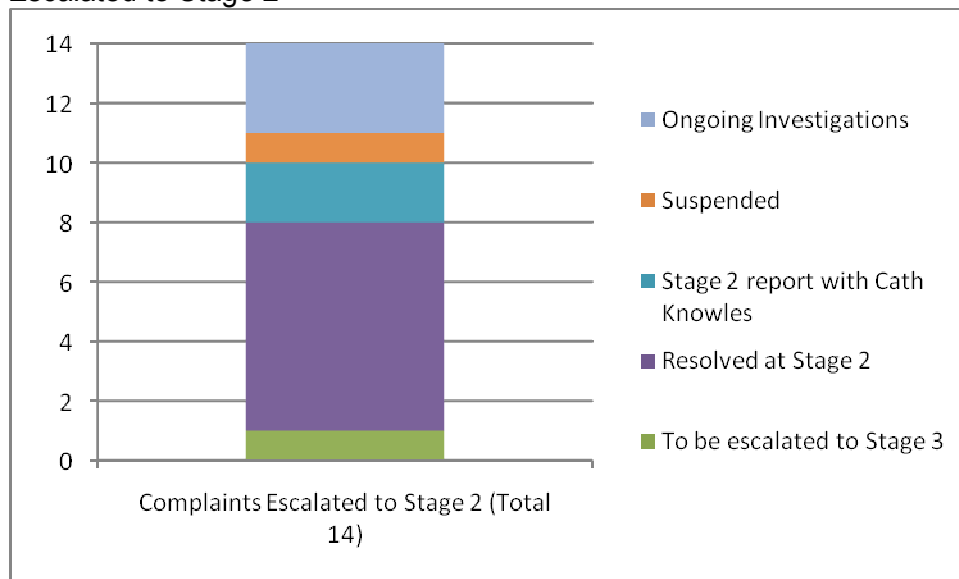
Graph 5

Complaints resolved at Stage 1



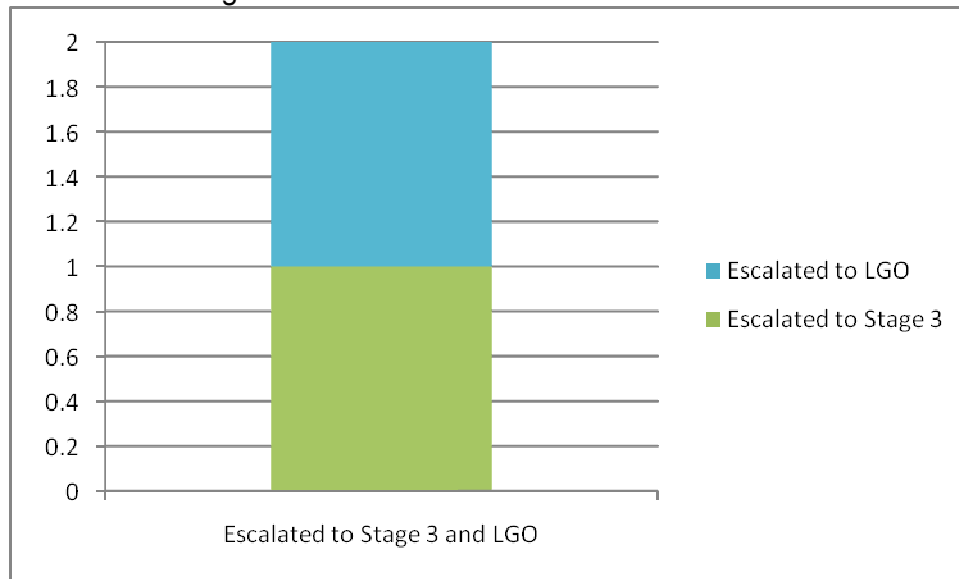
Graph 6

Escalated to Stage 2



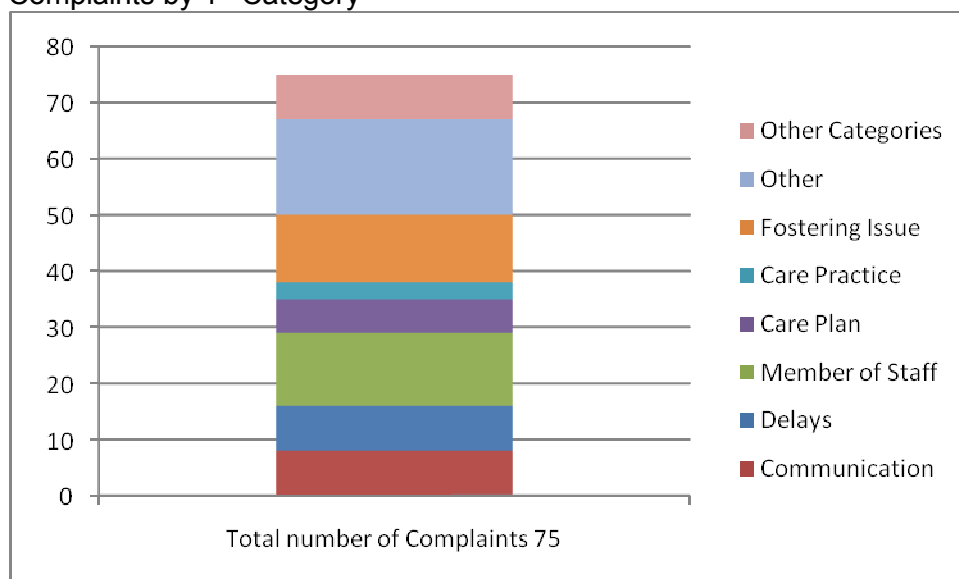
Graph 7

Escalated to Stage 3 and LGO



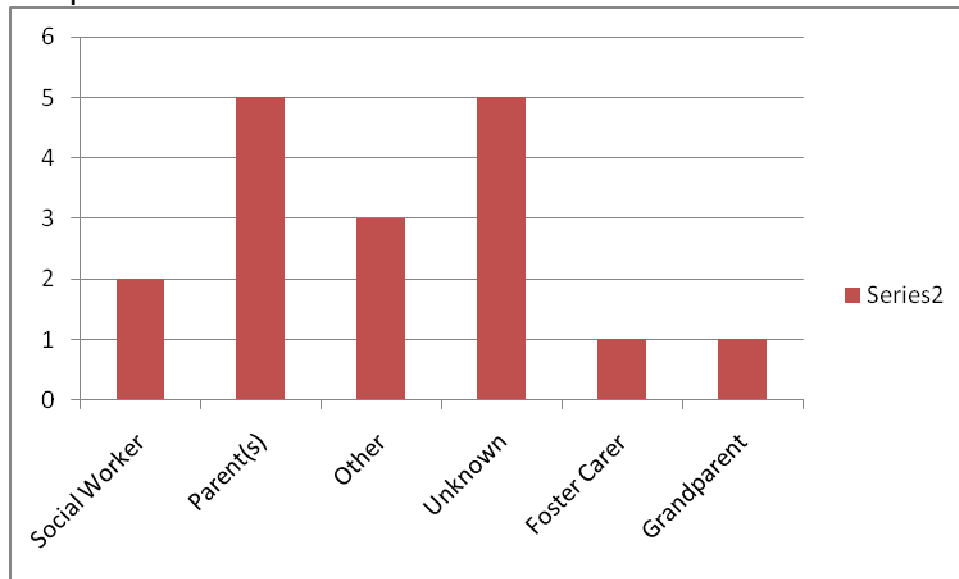
Graph 8

Complaints by 1st Category



Graph 9

Compliments were from:



CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 12 April 2011
Report of: Task and Finish Group
Subject/Title: Review of the Fostering Service

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 This report encloses the final report of the Task and Finish Group who conducted a Scrutiny Review of the Fostering Service.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 (a) that the report of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group be welcomed and supported;
- (b) that the recommendations of the Group be endorsed, and referred to the Cabinet for consideration and necessary action, and that Cabinet be invited initially to comment on the details of the recommendations.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 To progress the findings of the Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Group who reviewed the Family Support Services within Cheshire East.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 All

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 All

5.0 Policy Implications

- 5.1 Not known at this stage

6.0 Financial Implications

- 6.1 Not known at this stage

7.0 Legal Implications

- 7.1 Not known at this stage

8.0 Risk Management

- 8.1 Not known at this stage

9.0 Background and Options

- 9.1 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.

- 9.2 The final report of the Task and Finish Group is now attached for Members consideration.

10.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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December 2010 – April 2011

Overview and Scrutiny Review
Children and Families Scrutiny Committee

Fostering Services Review

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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 Cared for Children 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 the legacy policy inherited from Cheshire County Council which places the recruitment emphasis on family and friends be reconsidered to concentrate more on mainstream carers in order to increase the pool and range of foster placements.
- 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 a budget be created 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 purchase a small library of publications from the Safer Foster Carer Network for the use of foster carers.
- 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.
- 3.22 That Cheshire East formalises the on-going support that foster carers provide for themselves in partnership with the Cheshire Foster Carer Association.
- 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.
- 3.24 That the service level agreement with the Cheshire Foster Carer Association for providing an out-of-hours support line be re-commissioned.
- 3.25 That an awards night be established, alongside the Cheshire Foster Carer Association, to recognise the achievements of our Children in Care and the contributions of our foster carers.

- 3.26 That Councillors, in their role as corporate parents, make themselves known to the foster carers in their wards and offer appropriate support.
- 3.27 That a 'starter pack' be produced for each new placement which provides the requisite information about the child/young person and a small, flexible budget.
- 3.28 That support and resources for the Virtual School be maintained including the Personal Educational Allowance, Education Support Fund and educational psychologists.
- 3.29 That a comprehensive register of the appropriateness of out-of-Borough educational settings be compiled with a rigorous quality assurance programme put in place to monitor it.
- 3.30 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.
- 3.31 That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the processes, systems and staffing issues around health and Cared for Children.
- 3.32 That a new electronic recording system be purchased to ensure seamless information sharing between children's and adult's services.
- 3.33 That links be made with Registered Social Landlords to secure decent housing for care leavers, particularly in the Macclesfield area.
- 3.34 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.
- 3.35 That Cheshire East pays a retainer to Foster Carers for keeping open a placement for a young person at university.
- 3.36 That strong performance monitoring systems are put in place and embedded throughout the fostering service.
- 3.37 That exit interviews be conducted on all foster carers who resign from the service and the resulting information be analysed for trends.
- 3.38 That links are made, whenever possible, with the early intervention agenda – particularly with the SureStart programme.
- 3.39 That Cheshire East's payment rates be constantly tracked against and compared to our geographical and statistical neighbours
- 3.40 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.

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)

5.4 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 Busting¹

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.

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.

¹ Taken from ‘10 Questions to ask if you’re scrutinising services for looked after children’ [LGI&D and CIPS](#)

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.

7.0 Review Findings

7.1 Introduction

- 7.2.1 Children in Care of a local authority are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The majority of children in care are there because they have suffered abuse or neglect. At any one time around 60,000 children are looked after in England, a trend which continues to be on an upward curve with cases becoming ever more complex and resource intensive.
- 7.2.2 Whilst these children and young people are placed in various types of care, including residential care and specialist care placements, it is widely recognised that for many, foster care is the preferred option. As it is closest to a family environment, the outcomes for those placed in foster care can be more positive than for those in other types of care placement. Additionally, foster care placements cost substantially less than residential placements, a not inconsequential fact considering the difficult economic climate and ever increasing demand on social care resources. For these reasons, and in particular the former, the Group felt that foster care should be the preferred care option for most children, where deemed appropriate.
- 7.2.3 Considering this, Members partaking in the review felt that it was important to find out whether all was being done by Cheshire East to maximise its ability to meet the demand on foster placements. Realising that increasing the number, diversity and range of placements has a direct impact on reducing the dependency on residential placements and private foster agencies, we endeavoured to analyse the recruitment of foster carers and their subsequent retention. Evaluating the retention of foster carers led naturally to an interest in how they are supported, not only by the services within Cheshire East but also by partner authorities in education and health. Whilst obviously interested in how these services work for foster carers, it was also felt important to consider their impact on the children and young people themselves.
- 7.2.4 Prior to starting the research process and getting answers to these questions, it was deemed vital that we fully understood the situation and context in Cheshire East.

8.0 Foster Care in Cheshire East

- 8.1.1 In line with the national picture, the number of cared for children in Cheshire East peaked in October/November 2010 as a result of concerns following a number of national high profile and well documented child protection cases. Cheshire East has been able to stabilise the service and as a result, there has been a gradual decrease in the number of children in care, illustrated in the table below.

Month	Number	Month	Number	Month	Number	Month	Number	Month	Number
March 2009	352	September 2009	394	March 2010	440	September 2010	472	11/03/11	447
April 2009	350	October 2009	399	April 2010	437	October 2010	472		
May 2009	352	November 2009	413	May 2010	438	November 2010	453		
June 2009	362	December 2009	418	June 2010	442	December 2010	447		
July 2009	376	January 2010	432	July 2010	451	January 2011	443		
August 2009	390	February 2010	435	August 2010	456	February 2011	447		

8.1.2 These 447 children are placed in a variety of different settings, the majority of which are foster placements. The table below fully illustrates the placement type breakdown.

Placement Type	0-4	5-10	11-15	16+	Total	%
Relative/Friend	20	25	17	5	67	15
CE Foster Care	36	36	49	22	143	32
CW&C Foster Care	0	1	2	1	4	0.9
Independent Foster Care	32	32	20	13	97	22
CE Home	0	1	6	2	9	2
CW&C Home	0	0	0	0	0	0
Independent Home	0	1	11	10	22	4.9
Placed with parents	22	28	11	2	63	14
Independent living / Friends	0	0	0	7	7	1.6
NHS/health Trust	0	1	0	1	2	0.4
Residential School	0	0	5	2	7	1.6
Residential accommodation	0	0	0	4	4	0.9
Young offenders institute	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mum & Baby unit	5	0	0	0	5	1
Adoption	11	6	0	0	17	3.8
Woman's Refuge	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	126	131	121	69	447	100

8.1.3 Although not wholly within the remit of this review, attention was drawn to the relatively high number of children placed with parents (63). The Group were informed that increased attempts will be made in future practice to revoke care orders, where appropriate, in a more timely way. This will then free up further social work resources for other placement types, particularly foster care placements and help the service to reduce the number of cared for children back to pre September/October 2010 levels.

8.1.4 The following tables show Cheshire East 'Foster Carer Approvals' and 'Foster Carer Resignation and De-Registration' since April 2010.

Foster Carer Approvals – (n) denotes placement(s) created

	Respite	Family and Friends	Mainstream	Total
April 10	1(1)	1(1)	0	2(2)
May 10	0	2(3)	0	2(3)
Jun 10	0	3(4)	0	3(4)
Jul 10	0	4(6)	0	4(6)
Aug 10	0	2(5)	0	2(5)
Sept 10	0	0	3(5)	3(5)
Oct 10	0	0	0	0
Nov 10	(1)	2(2)	0	2(3)
Dec 10	2 (2)	1 (3)	1 (1)	4 (6)
Jan 11	1 (1)	1 (1)	0	2 (2)
Feb 11	0	2 (2)	0	2 (2)
Mar 11				
Total	4 (5)	18 (27)	4 (6)	26 (38)

Foster Carer Resignation and De-Registration Numbers and Reasons - (n) denotes placement(s) lost.

	Ill Health	Retirement	Personal Reasons	Change of Circumstance	Safeguarding Issues	Total
April 10	0	0	0	0	0	0
May 10	1(-3)	0	0	1(-1)	0	2(-4)
Jun 10	0	3(-10)	2(-5)	0	0	5(-15)
Jul 10	0	0	3(-4)	0	0	3(-4)
Aug 10	0	0	1(-2)	0	0	1(-2)
Sept 10	0	1(-3)	1(-1)	3(-3)	0	5(-7)
Oct 10	0	0	1(-1)	1(-2)	0	2(-3)
Nov 10			1(-4)			1(-4)
Dec 10	0	0	2 (-4)	2 (-4)	0	0
Jan 11	0	1 (-2)	2 (-5)	3 (-7)	0	1 (-2)
Feb 11	1 (-1)	2 (-5)	2 (-4)	5 (-10)	1 (-1)	2 (-5)
Mar 11						
Total	2 (-5)	10 (-15)	17(-40)	29(-60)	2 (-5)	10 (-15)

8.1.5 As can be seen there is a deficit between the number of mainstream carers being approved and the number resigning and de-registering. This can partly be explained by Cheshire County Council's legacy policy which was to concentrate on family and friends as carers rather than mainstream carers. Whilst this had been done for good reason, there is feeling that the efficacy of this should be examined, something that is discussed later in this review.

8.1.6 That is not the only reason however and as is congruent with the national picture, there is a real challenge for Cheshire East to reconcile a growing demand for placements in the face of a dwindling supply and competition.

8.1.7 The current budget for the fostering service is set out below. The fostering team's under spend can be explained by a number of staffing vacancies that have yet to be filled. Following the new restructure it is expected that this quota will be fulfilled and the service strengthened as a result. It can also be seen that in terms of fostering allowances, there has been a large overspend. This can be attributed to the fact that Cheshire East inherited a pay formula that was below the Fostering Network recommended amount and therefore had to be rectified. The budget has not yet been adjusted accordingly but it was noted that this was in the process of being evaluated.

<u>Summary of Fostering Budget Forecast</u>				
Centre Name	Budget for 2010-11	Projected Spend (£)	Protected Outturn (£)	Variance (£)
Fostering Team	1,889,545	1,290,117	-599,428	Under
Fostering Allowances	2,592,275	4,588,786	1,996,511	Over
Interagency Fees		86,141	86,141	Over
Fostering Service	4,481,820	5,965,044	1,483,224	Over

8.1.8 With this in mind, the table below highlights Cheshire East's current fostering allowances.

		0-4 Years		16+ years
Basic	(£125.09 x 52)	£6,504.68	(£215.74 x 52)	£11,218.48
Initial Clothing		£264.00		£538.00
Birthday		£125.09		£215.74
Holiday		£312.73		£539.35
Religious		£125.09		£215.74
		£7,331.59		£13,166.51
Disability Allowance	(£137.62 x 52)	£7,156.24	(£237.30 x 52)	£12,339.60
		£7,938.15		£13,166.51
Payment for Skills (per child)				
Band 1	(£62.44 x 52)	£10,578.47		£15,974.19
Band 2	(£93.66 x 52)	£12,201.91		£17,597.63
Band 3	(£156.10 x 52)	£15,448.79		£20,844.51
Salaried Carers	(£421 x 52)	£29,223.59		£34,619.31
Additional Costs paid: School Trips/Holidays School Uniform Ethnic, racial and cultural costs Travel, Telephone & Hospitality Rite of Passage gift - £100				

8.2 Following this brief, Members designed a wide-ranging and comprehensive research programme. After this process, the Review 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.

8.2.1 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. For the purpose of clarity, these issues have been put into respective themes with the main arguments outlined in the conclusion.

9.0 Themes

9.1 Recruitment of Foster Carers

9.1.2 There is a shortage of just over 10,000 foster families in the UK so Cheshire East is not alone in being unable to meet demand. This shortage means that Cheshire East is often forced to place children where there is a vacancy rather than where best meets children's needs. Mismatched foster placements are bad for children, their parents and their foster carers and are more likely to disrupt. Not having enough foster families means that children may be forced to change schools and move away from family and friends and for the Cheshire East; it means that we can be forced to place children with expensive private agencies and out of Borough families.

9.1.3 Foster carers who experience the disruption of placements also suffer. If their experiences are particularly negative, it is possible that they may leave the fostering service altogether – further exacerbating the shortage of foster families and the lack of choice of foster placements for children.

9.1.4 Nearly all of the experts that the Group spoke to argued that the larger the pool of foster families, the more likely it is that a good match can be found, in terms of location, culture, language, religion, background, lifestyle and even interests. It's about finding a foster home for a child that feels familiar to them, where they can feel comfortable whether they are there for two weeks, two months or two years.

9.1.5 With this in mind, it is important that Cheshire East reviews its current policy of focusing on recruiting carers from the child's friends and family. As previously mentioned, the Group were made aware that this had been done due to the advantages of keeping a child within their family environment. Whilst the Group would not argue against making attempts to keep a child within their family, there does need to be a step change in recruitment policy so that Cheshire East can offer fully comprehensive and wide ranging placement options. It is likely that a change in family legislation from 1 April 2011 will assist in addressing this.

9.1.6 Advertising and Marketing

9.1.7 Key to any recruitment strategy is how you market and advertise the services that you provide. This is a well versed maxim in the private sector and whilst it may seem inappropriate to be aligning the care of children with a private sector model, the Group are convinced that this is the best way forward in terms of a recruitment strategy, to get the very best outcomes for our cared for children.

9.1.8 In the site visit to Stoke-on-Trent City Council's (henceforth Stoke-on-Trent) fostering service, they outlined how they are running their fostering service recruitment strategy 'like a business' and they continued to assert that this is the only way that local authorities will be able to *manage the market*.

9.1.9 The group were heartened to find that Cheshire East had a recruitment strategy that aligned with these findings. Indeed, since 2009 when there had been no one fulfilling a recruitment role, it was discovered that a new brand identity (FACE – Fostering & Adoption Cheshire East) has been established.

9.1.10 Under this brand identity, a lot of work has been done to strengthen the recruitment process for those interested in becoming foster carers or in adopting. For instance, a dedicated stand-alone website and dedicated fostering and adoption hotline have been purchased and a number of events have been

organised and ran successfully. Additionally, it was discovered that every effort was being made to make sure that the FACE brand achieved as much coverage as possible in a number of publications and advertising spaces.

9.1.11 The group were made aware that all of these initiatives had combined to generate a 500% increase in enquiries in 12 months (running at 60 per month as compared to 2-10). The root of this success being to create 'triggers' for people who had been already considering fostering and adoption to contact the service.

9.1.12 The increase in enquiries outlined above is obviously very impressive and the Group would like to note their full support for the work being performed by the recruitment officer and the approach that has been adopted.

9.1.13 Conversion Rates and timescales between initial expression of interest and final approval by panel

9.1.14 The work being carried out by the recruitment team has seen a substantial increase in the number of enquiries from people interested in becoming foster carers. Whilst this is encouraging, what really is important is converting these enquiries into approved foster carers who can then provide Cheshire East with that wide pool which it so requires. The group were informed that research has shown that the optimum time for people to confirm their interest after an initial enquiry is two weeks. Noting this, the service has recently started to send a direct mail reminder if the person has not been in contact within the two weeks. It was reported that this initiative had brought in an additional 30% of interested potential carers.

9.1.15 The importance of keeping people involved and communicated with during the application process can be seen therefore. The Group are pleased that whilst work is being done to improve this, making foster carers feeling wanted and valued as soon as they make contact with the authority (and throughout the approval process and beyond) is absolutely vital and should be made a priority.

9.1.16 In the feedback provided from some newly approved foster carers, they explained how it had taken a considerable amount of time for them to be approved – over two years. It must be noted that they went through the approval process during local government reorganisation, however they anecdotally informed the group that they had friends who had recently chosen to foster with other authorities due to Cheshire East's reputation for taking a long time to approve. Whether this reputation is fair or not, and the Group feels that from other evidence collected it is probably a legacy from the County Council, improving the timescales for approval must be made a priority.

9.1.17 Indeed, on the whole, the process of approval appears overly complicated and drawn out and this is working to put off potential foster carers. An example of this can be seen with regard to the fostering panel process. Whilst there is some excellent work being performed by the panel, there might be the possibility of investigating whether the panel could be more flexible and more aligned to each case's progress to ensure the minimal of amount delay. In a climate where there is a significant shortage of carers, delay is something Cheshire East can ill afford. To rectify this issue, the Group suggests that lessons are learned from Stoke-on-Trent. To date Stoke-on-Trent have appointed 24 new carers since April 2010 and another 8 are scheduled for panel before the end of March 2011. They also have a 14% conversion rate from initial enquiry to panel approval – above the national average (8%) and Cheshire East (8%).

9.1.18 The key to this success has been due to their 16-week turnaround strategy for approving foster carers from the original expression of interest. This deadline is useful on three counts. Firstly, it prevents the relationship between the social worker and the applicant becoming collusive. Secondly, it reduces the number of drop-outs and lastly, it provides an end-point from which other key dates in the process can be tracked and analysed. For instance if people are dropping out at a particular stage, this can be analysed and rectified. Further to this, having the process set out with key dates earmarked would help prospective carers to see that they are moving forward with their application and hitting milestones. As an aside, it was noted that whilst Cheshire East do not currently measure or analyse the average approval time, this is something that will be done in the new structure. Anecdotally, the Group were informed that Cheshire East's average approval timescale could be significantly longer than 16 weeks.

9.1.19 Other methods to improve recruitment

9.1.20 When interviewed, the Chair of the Fostering Panel suggested that one thing that would help improve recruitment would be for Cheshire East to have the ability to pay for home alterations. One of the most common reasons why carers do not proceed with their initial expression of interest is due to their lack of space at home. It would be cost effective for Cheshire East therefore, to pay the commercial mortgage rates for the modifications whilst the carer is in the employment of the authority as this would mean that we would not have to place a child in an IFA. Similarly, Cheshire East could pay for the modifications needed for a carer to look after a disabled child, negating the need for the authority to place them in an expensive and non-family orientated residential placement. This concept would also extend to existing carers who wish to take on another placement but again do not have the requisite space or wish to allow sibling group placements. This proposal mirrors similar schemes in other local authority fostering services. It should also be explored whether there is provision in the disabled facilities grant to assist with such a programme.

9.1.21 A number of people interviewed for this review felt that it would be very beneficial for carers in the approval process to be paired with an experienced foster carer who would act as a mentor. This would not only assist the new carer in their training and reduce drop-out rates, it would help experienced carers to feel like they are part of the professional service and that their skills are valued.

9.1.22 Foster Carer allowances are obviously a big issue in terms of recruitment, with some, although not all prospective carers choosing those authorities or IFAs with the most competitive rates. Indeed, from the evidence collected within this review it seems as though allowances become a bigger issue for carers once they already have children placed with them and the demands become clear. This is a complex and multi-faceted area and as a result it possibly best sits in the 'retention of carers' part of the report.

9.2 Retention of Foster Carers

9.2.1 Historically foster carers provided a safe, secure home without the expectation that they would provide therapeutic support. They are now however, increasingly expected to look after children with significant emotional and behavioural problems often arising from a lack of stimulation at birth. Indeed many children come from deprived and disadvantaged backgrounds with problems compounded by neglect, maltreatment and experience of domestic violence; challenges which they then often bring into their placements.

9.2.2 Challenging child behaviours and carers' lack of skill in dealing with them are the two most common reasons for placement disruption which can then in turn lead to the resignation of carers and poor outcomes for the child. It is imperative therefore that Cheshire East has the correct training and support systems in place to prevent this from happening.

9.2.3 Placements

9.2.4 Matching a child or young person with the correct and most appropriate foster placement is the first step in ensuring that the risk of placement disruption is reduced. If the placement is inappropriate then there is the risk that foster carers may become disillusioned with the service and that the child continues to move placements, damaging their self-esteem and ability to build familial attachments.

9.2.5 The Group found that there had been some difficulty for the service in always finding an appropriate placement, often forcing them to turn to IFAs. The most important change that can be made to improve this is to increase the depth and range of foster carers in Cheshire East, something that has been discussed in detail in the proceeding section.

9.2.6 In addition to this, there are other ways in which the placements process can be improved. The Group can see that the service has already taken significant steps to make improvements with a recent restructure creating a new placements unit. This unit will bring together three functions; payments, business support and placements, creating a much needed coherency between them. With regards to the latter, the Group learned that more robust matching procedures are being developed in which placement planning meetings would be held within three to five days of the placement being arranged. By explaining the situation to the foster carer, it is hoped that these will reduce the risk of disruption by adding clarity to the placement and its possible demands.

9.2.7 When a concern was raised over the current placement request form, it was noted that it is being re-developed, with a view to it providing all of the requisite information (age, place, gender etc.). It was suggested that attempts should be made to link the information in the request forms i.e. in terms of which placements are most required, to the marketing strategy so that the most sought after placements can be sourced and provided.

9.2.8 In terms of preventing placement disruption, the Group were made aware of Stoke-on-Trent's practice of holding disruption meetings. Following their extensive monitoring and recording processes, senior managers are made aware of possible placement disruptions by social workers and steps are made to attempt to rectify the causes.

9.2.9 Training

- 9.2.10 Whether or not a carer is newly approved or has ten years experience, the training that Cheshire East provides is vital in making sure that they are fully prepared to cope with the myriad of demands that will be placed upon them.
- 9.2.11 The Group were made aware that since the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), training for foster carers had been a shared service until April 2010. The resulting disaggregation of resources left Cheshire West and Chester with a disproportionate amount of resources. As a result, Cheshire East has almost had to 'start from scratch' to construct its own training programme.
- 9.2.12 The first step in this process was to send out a questionnaire to foster carers to ask them what training they wanted or had found useful in the past. Following from this, aspects such as times, venues and content of events had been tailored in a bespoke manner to match that of the carers needs. It is this self-imposed practice of monitoring and evaluation that left the Group feeling confident that training will always be relevant and tailored to the individual and collective needs of carers. This approach is commended and should be continued.
- 9.2.13 Even considering this, there were a few issues regarding the training process that emerged from the evidence gathering process. Indeed, in speaking to the foster carers themselves, it seems that a common theme emerged around the appropriateness of training in terms of the level that it is pitched at. This is obviously a very difficult thing to get right when a course needs to cater for a wide demographic but it was noted that for more experienced carers a more workshop based programme would be useful. It was felt that they could be involved in delivering some training themselves, making best use of their experience and skills.
- 9.2.14 Additionally, it was noted that some foster carers interviewed felt that the portfolio that they had to complete during pre-approval training was somewhat cumbersome and repetitive. The Group are aware that this is a statutory document that requires completion but it is suggested that perhaps it could be streamlined or even made available to be completed online. Furthermore, if the document is a requirement, the importance of completing it should be communicated clearly to the carers.
- 9.2.15 Attention was drawn to the possibility for providing training for the safe handling of children and young people as carers do not feel appropriately equipped to do this at the current time.
- 9.2.16 As with all local authority budgets, money for resources is sparse. However, the Group felt that it would be greatly beneficial if a budget was made available so that the service can purchase a small library of publications from the Safer Caring Foster Network for the use of foster carers. This would compliment the training support and development standards (Children's Workforce Development Council) that foster carers have to meet.
- 9.2.17 As an aside, the Group would also want to outline the importance of maintaining financial support for those foster carers attending training events. Additionally, the Group would also like to see that Cheshire East are ensuring that foster carers have access to the internet as training resources move increasingly towards this medium.

9.2.18 **Support**

9.2.19 Supervising Social Workers

9.2.20 The biggest support mechanism for a foster carer is their relationship with their supervising social worker. On the whole, the evidence suggests that Cheshire East's foster carers have a good relationship with their social worker and that they highly value the time that they get to spend with them. The Group were also informed of situations in which foster carers had found it difficult to contact their social worker and that there had been some instances in which the child's social worker had been unable to fulfil their basic statutory visits. There is also the feeling that Cheshire East has become increasingly reliant on inexperienced social workers.

9.2.21 It appears as though there has been a high 'churn' of social workers which has resulted in a lack of consistency in planning, little knowledge of individual children and instances of poor communication with foster carers.

9.2.22 The Group are very aware of the pressure that social workers have been under since the formation of Cheshire East. With reference to the budget highlighted at the beginning of this review, it can be seen that there has been a significant staffing shortage, explaining the considerable under spend. When this is rectified, it is fully expected that the service will be strengthened naturally. Further to this, it was noted that Cheshire East are moving towards the Hackney 'Reclaiming Social Work' model which is expected to achieve a number of improvements by stabilising the workforce and creating efficiencies in work flow. With these changes afoot, the Group are confident that the requisite improvements will be achieved.

9.2.23 Cared for Children's Support Team

9.2.24 Even with this in mind, the Group would like to draw attention to the importance of the Cared for Children's Support Team (formerly known as the Multi Professional Support Team). They provide invaluable support to children and foster carers where there are behavioural and emotional problems that can be very difficult for foster carers to manage. They also have a very close relationship with the CAMHS service. Without their input, many placements would break down creating more instability for Cheshire East's children. Their assessments also contribute to making well matched placements for children thereby promoting stability. It is important to note that whilst this team are not performing a statutory duty, the role they play is vital in ensuring positive outcomes for Cared for Children. On the whole, they are very cost effective and all attempts should be made to support their work in light of potential budget cuts.

9.2.25 Respite

9.2.26 Respite can be vital in giving carers a break from the rigours of looking after cared for children. One carer interviewed said that they can 'get ground down very easily' and that a period of respite can make the difference between the placement breaking down or not or even the difference between the carer resigning or staying. The Group were made aware that it was difficult for carers to get respite, another symptom of the lack of carers in Cheshire East's pool. One option that could be explored is to use an organisation such as Dreamwall which provides 'time-out' breaks for foster carers and has reduced by 95 per cent the proportion of foster carers leaving fostering. The cost equated to

£674.43 per child per year, and 182 children received the service. Using the social return on investment (SROI) method of calculating value and benefits as well as costs, there was a £1.63 return for every £1.00 invested in the project. One of the strongest elements of this programme is that they take the attitude that respite is not just for the carer but it should also be a positive experience for the child or young person. This reduces the feeling of rejection that some children in care feel when placed in respite.

9.2.27 Whilst not able to commission Dreamwall as they are based in Hampshire, there would be opportunity to investigate the possibility of links being made with Cheshire East's leisure facilities under the corporate parenting strategy to see if a similar programme could be implemented.

9.2.28 There is also certainly scope to formalise the on-going informal support that foster carers provide for themselves in terms of respite. This is a positive initiative as the children and young people often go to an environment which they are familiar with. This could be strengthened by pairing foster carers so to create further stability.

9.2.29 Out of Hours Support

9.2.30 One of the major themes to emerge from the feedback from foster carers is that they do not feel adequately supported in the hours beyond 9-5 as the emergency team in place, whilst helpful, do not have the appropriate knowledge of each individual case. The Group noted that Stoke-on-Trent had had similar feedback and as a result established a placement support team which operates from 8am to 9pm, 7 days a week. This works as a targeted resource with the extra support provided to those foster carers who are looking after children who have been identified by an earlier analysis of placement disruptions. The Group feels that lessons could be learned here. For instance, there could be an opportunity to make use of existing informal fostering care networks by further facilitating opportunities for carers to contact other carers who have had experience with a particular child. Indeed, the service might look to re-commission the out-of-hours support line from the Cheshire Foster Carer Association.

9.2.31 Payments

9.2.32 Whilst most foster carers do not enter the profession for financial remuneration, it is vital to make sure that they do not feel out-of-pocket as this can generate ill feeling. Indeed, in the feedback provided by the foster carers interviewed it wasn't so much the amount they are paid that causes issues but more the timing of the payments. It was suggested that there was little synergy between the PARIS system and the releasing of payments. When interviewing the newly established placements team, the Group were left confident that this would be rectified.

9.2.33 Whilst the amounts that Cheshire East pay foster carers did not arise as a major issue, there is certainly a need to track whether our payments are competitive with our geographical and statistical neighbours. If our payments fall significantly below these respective levels it only adds an incentive for foster carers to go to another authority. This can be particularly costly if Cheshire East has trained the respective carer.

9.2.34 Throughout this review, the argument has been made that by increasing resources to the fostering service, Cheshire East would actually save money by reducing the amount it pays out to Residential Provision placements. Indeed,

whilst it is difficult to determine an average cost per child due to the range of weekly rates the following clearly demonstrates the saving that can be made.

LAC Foster Care Weekly Cost Range (inc. IFAS): £ 516 - £1,656

LAC Residential Weekly Cost Range: £1,744 - £3,500

It is too difficult to separate out the amount we pay IFAS as compared to our own carers as each case can vary dramatically but as an approximation the amount we pay IFAs is on average 3-4 times the amount that we pay our own carers. It is suggested therefore that a robust business case is compiled which investigates the benefit cost ratio of investing into fostering resources.

9.2.35 Making Foster Carers feel Valued

9.2.36 Something that was highlighted throughout this review by a number of witnesses is the need to make foster carers feel as though they are valued by the service. Most of the recommendations in this report whilst having strong 'invest to save' arguments underpinning them will have a cost implication. Ensuring foster carers feel as though they are part of the professional service is something that bears little cost but would result in generating a large amount of goodwill. For instance, the Group feel that small gestures would go along way to show that Cheshire East fully appreciates that the value that foster carers bring to the care of our most vulnerable children.

9.2.37 Cheshire County Council used to run an annual 'Welcome to Cheshire' conference in which newly approved foster carers would come and meet experienced carers, facilitating networking opportunities. It was suggested that a similar conference could be re-established, perhaps shared across the region, in which similar network opportunities would be made available. Within such a conference, provision could be made for awarding long service or outstanding achievement awards. The Cheshire Foster Carer Association have ran a similar meeting over the last few years and links could be made with this in future.

9.2.38 Further to these events, it would also be highly beneficial to induce a change of attitude within the service so that there is as little differentiation between practitioners and foster carers as possible. Whilst it is recognised that different roles have different demands, attempts should be made not to define these differences in a hierarchical fashion.

9.2.39 Along the same lines, it was thought that a simple change that could be made would be to ensure that Councillors, in their role as corporate parents, identify the Cheshire East carers that reside in their wards or private carers that look after Cheshire East Children. They would then offer their support and act as a link to the authority.

9.2.40 Improving the experience of new carers and new placements

9.2.41 As in any walk of life, first impressions can be vital in setting a relationship off on the right foot. It is key therefore that Cheshire East does all it can to fully welcome new carers into the service and to make sure that transitions into new placements go as smoothly as possible. Attention was drawn to the way that many carers feel that they receive a child without the appropriate background information. Additionally, it was noted that foster carers are often frustrated that their budget does not allow them to purchase items such a toys for the child when they are

placed, bearing in mind that children and young people often arrive with little to no possessions. With both of these points in mind, it was suggested that a 'starter pack' could be produced for each child with the requisite information and a small auxiliary, flexible budget provided.

9.2.42 Link with Education and Health

9.2.43 As placement demands become increasingly complex, foster carers will become increasingly reliant on the support of authorities and partners beyond the remit of social care. Two of the most important of these partners are in the health and education sectors – two areas in which cared for children statistically lag behind their peers.

9.3 Educational Attainment of those in Foster Care

- 9.3.1 In 2008, 14 per cent of looked after children achieved five A*-C grades at GCSE, compared to 65.3 per cent for all children. Ensuring that looked after children have the right support to be able to participate fully in school life, and that their school career is not disrupted by constant placement moves can make a big difference. They may well have lost out on education because of the circumstances which led them entering care and need help to catch up. A high proportion of looked after children see entering care as having been good for their education, a national trend mirrored in the findings of this review.
- 9.3.2 It is important to recognise therefore that raising the attainment of Cared for Children is a central responsibility of local authorities and their partners in children's trust arrangements and a vital part of narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. It requires local authorities to work effectively with their partners, in particular schools and health services, to support their learning and development and remove barriers to their education. As corporate parents, local authorities are under a specific duty to promote the educational achievement of looked after children.
- 9.3.3 With this in mind, the Group were highly encouraged by the work being carried out by the Virtual School and the Virtual Head and his team. After coming into existence on 1 September 2010, the Virtual School has continued to enable Cheshire East to take an overview of all of our Cared for Children and their progress. Within this, it also has a role to support and challenge schools and other agencies in how they work with our vulnerable children and young people. Important to highlight is the part the Virtual School plays in providing training, advice and support to foster carers, designated teachers and social workers, working to reduce the likelihood of placement disruption.
- 9.3.4 The Virtual School is also responsible for two funds which it uses to improve the outcomes for Cheshire East's Cared for Children. The first of these is the **Personal Educational Allowance (PEA)**. The origin of this fund is rooted in the white paper *Care Matters: Time for Change*, published in June 2007. This confirmed the Government's commitment to introduce an annual personal education allowance for all looked after children who are at risk of not reaching the national expected standards of attainment. They are intended to help local authorities support the wide range of learning needs of looked after children and give them access to additional learning and development activities. This support is tailored to their individual needs and children and young people should be actively involved in identifying barriers to their learning and in deciding what provision will help them overcome these challenges and make improved progress with their education.
- 9.3.5 Funding for personal educational allowance for Cared for Children comprises part of the local authority Area Based Grant (ABG), a non-ringfenced general grant. It is for local authorities to decide how best to use this funding to meet their duty to promote the educational achievement of looked after children. The Group would strongly suggest therefore that the Virtual Head is supported as much as possible to use this fund to improve the educational outcomes for our Cared for Children.
- 9.3.6 The Virtual School also has responsibility for the **Education Support Fund (ESF)**. This is one of the main tools of the Virtual School in our support of our Cared for Children's education. The flexibility of having finance that Cheshire East can put into schools to support Cared for Children in crisis has enabled the

authority to maintain a large number of educational placements and has led to better outcomes for our children and young people. It also allows Cheshire East to be creative by combining funding for schools where there are higher numbers of Cared for Children. For example, in a Cheshire East Primary School, where there are currently 23 Cared for Children, the authority has funded a part time, temporary Learning Mentor who works specifically with Cared for Children. The mentor meets and greets the children on the playground and ensures a smooth start to the school day whilst also supporting them in lessons and providing them with a friendly face to go to at breaks and lunchtimes. The school has seen this initiative as helpful and successful although it is too early to measure the impact on individual attainment and progress.

Case study of successful use of ESF with individual children and young people

Names of the children have been changed to ensure anonymity

Peter – Year 3 Cheshire East Primary School (8 years old)

Peter is on an Interim Care Order following his adoption placement breakdown last year on 24 January 2010. Prior to this Peter's adoptive mother had sadly died. Peter along with his brother Joe (Year 5 – 10 years old) has had 3 placement breakdowns since this point. Peter and his brother lived with carers in an out-of-Borough area for a short while but the boys are currently living with a private agency foster carer in the North of the Borough but this placement is close to disruption also.

Peter and all his siblings have attended a Cheshire East Primary School which is close to where his adoptive family live. There have been ongoing safeguarding issues around the family because of disclosures made by various members of the sibling group and this has been a significant area of focus for Peter's school too. For instance, Peter finds it extremely difficult to trust adults.

Peter's scores at end of KS1

2c Reading

2c Writing

2b Maths

Peter has been eligible for help through the PEA and this has been mainly used for afternoon activities as he finds it difficult to remain on task throughout the whole school day. ESF has also been used to provide TA support for Peter for help with his concentration, his behaviour and his learning. Despite this additional support however, Peter remained in precarious situation. Considering this, additional ESF was requested and this is being used to provide Peter with full-time support. His current timetable is:

- mornings – literacy/numeracy with TA support
- afternoons – various supported activities (visits to farm/riding/therapeutic horticulture – plus activities with an officer from the Virtual School for Cared for Children)

Peter's scores at end of Autumn Term

Reading - 2b (1 part move in term)

Writing - 2b (1 part move in term)

Maths - 3b (3 part move in term) - excellent progress and he is very keen to improve.

Without ESF Peter would not have been able to sustain his school place and the school would not have been able to provide the level of support he needs. Furthermore, Peter would not have been able to make the academic progress he has made since the end of KS1 and perhaps most importantly Peter would have experienced even more loss and lack of consistency in his short but already tragic life.

9.3.7 As can be seen from the example above, the ESF is achieving some impressive outcomes for our Cared for Children. It is also important to note that a high percentage of Cared for Children are at risk of exclusion. The cost of permanently

excluding a child is hard to calculate but research by Fairbridge (2008) states that the average lifetime cost of crime of an excluded child is £15,527. It is also clear that the costs of pupils being educated via a Pupil Referral Unit or through out of borough educational provision is much higher than the cost of putting early support using ESF. The group would suggest therefore that ensuring that the ESF is kept as a resource will firstly improve the educational outcomes of Cared for Children and secondly that if kept it will save Cheshire East a considerable amount of money in the longer term.

- 9.3.8 During the evidence gathering process it became clear that there are other things that Cheshire East could do to improve the educational outcomes for Cared for Children beyond that of supporting the excellent work being carried out by the Virtual School.
- 9.3.9 Indeed, the Chair of the Fostering Panel drew attention to the importance of the resources that reside within the educational environment for the fostering service. In particular it was noted that the reports that the educational psychologists produce are very useful for the panel when they are reviewing a child's forward plan or when conducting a sibling assessment. The Group would suggest therefore that when resources are being allocated, due thought is given to the potential unintended consequences on placement disruption that a loss of educational psychologists or other specialists might cause.
- 9.3.10 One aspect that the Group uncovered was in respect to the educationalist settings in which we place our out of Borough children and young people. Indeed, it was made apparent that there is currently no way of knowing the quality of these placements and their value for money as we are relying on little more than word of mouth in assessing their appropriateness. As Cheshire East has a responsibility for the well being of these children and young people, it is vital that a comprehensive register of the appropriateness of these settings is compiled and that a rigorous quality assurance programme is put in place to monitor it. The newly appointed contracts officer should ensure that this is addressed.
- 9.3.11 In terms of the feedback from the young people in care, it was pleasing to note that on the whole they had a positive experience in their respective schools. Having said this, there was some feeling that they were being over-monitored by teachers and that this was singling them out in an unhelpful way. The Group recognise that it can be difficult to get the balance correct between providing appropriate support and not making the child or young person feel different. It was suggested that the Virtual School could provide some training for teachers to improve this situation.
- 9.3.12 The Group would also like to draw attention to the importance of maintaining placements nearby to the preferred education setting. This promotes placement stability and helps to reduce disruption. The new placements team will help to improve this.
- 9.3.13 If there is no way to maintain the educational setting then attempts must be made to make the transition as seamless as possible. There is a role for the designated teachers in each setting to play here with the support of the virtual school.

9.4 Health and Wellbeing of those in Foster Care

- 9.4.1 Looked after children and young people share many of the same health risks and problems as their peers, but they frequently enter care with a worse level of health due to the impact of poverty, abuse and neglect. Evidence suggests that looked after children are nearly five times more likely to have a mental health disorder than all children. Local authorities, primary care trusts (PCT) and strategic health authorities (SHA) must have regard to statutory guidance issued in November 2009 on promoting the health and well-being of Cared for Children, which requires children in care to have a personal health plan.
- 9.4.2 In reviewing the evidence in relation to health and Cared for Children, it became immediately apparent that there are a number of inherent systemic failings. Local authorities, PCTs and SHAs have a role to play in promoting the health and well-being of Cared for Children. Precisely what this role looks like for each authority is unclear and will continue to be so until the new structural changes to the NHS are consolidated. With this in mind, the Group feels that it would be germane to commission a Task and Finish Review to further consider the observations in this review when there is both more detail and clarity.
- 9.4.3 As is a recurrent theme throughout this review, issues around Cared for Children become increasingly complicated and difficult to handle when either a Cheshire East child is placed out of Borough or an out of Borough child is placed with a Cheshire East family/carer. Both the Designated Nurses for Cared for Children expressed a concern over how health information about a child often emerges in an ad hoc fashion and sometimes emerges with large gaps in their medical history. This is often a symptom of professionals being unclear as to whose responsibility it is to maintain records and then subsequently who is responsible for filing or passing them to the appropriate person when necessary. As Cared for Children often have both acute and chronic health problems this is a serious issue which could have potentially damaging consequences. It was suggested that in any new arrangement a system needs to be put in place that everyone involved in health and Cared for Children understands and complies with. As the administrative burdens are only going to increase on professionals as back office staff are reduced, it will become even more important to maintain efficiencies in work flow.
- 9.4.4 One of the key front line roles in terms of health and cared for children is that of the Designated Nurse. There are currently two Designated Nurses for Cared for Children in Cheshire East with one based in Nantwich and one based in Macclesfield. They have two administrative support staff (1FTE). Their primary role is to make sure that every cared for child has their health and development needs assessed and that their subsequent health plan is actioned. The Group were informed that both Designated Nurses are only contracted to work part-time but that to meet their work demands they often have to work up to and beyond full time hours. It was explained to the Group that there is a particular concern over the 16+ age group in terms of the relevant authorities not meeting their health needs due to under capacity. This has a number of knock on effects – particularly around teenage pregnancy. It was suggested that there is a strong need for a Designated Nurse or a youth worker for young people and care leavers. In order to improve work flow, communication and efficiencies, the Group would suggest that incorporating the Designated Nurses into the offices and if possible the management structures of the Fostering and Adoption teams would have beneficial consequences. It would be particularly useful if further liaison between the Designated Nurses and the Cared for Children Support team could be facilitated.

- 9.4.5 As a further improvement, the Designated Nurses highlighted that they would appreciate systems put in place that would enable them to self-audit and benchmark.
- 9.4.6 Whilst much of the evidence around health and Cared for Children centred on big strategic improvements which Cheshire East may or may not have the ability to implement following the public health restructures, there are also smaller but important changes that Cheshire East can make to improve the well being of Cared for Children right away.
- 9.4.7 Furthermore, in terms of their access to leisure facilities, it was noted that whilst Cheshire East provides very well in terms of discounts and passes, what is available for Cared for Children is perhaps not communicated as clearly as it could be.
- 9.4.8 As a final point, the Group would very much like to draw attention to the importance of the advocacy service that Barnardos offers to Cared for Children. They offer an excellent external point of contact and outlet for those who may wish to talk about the service they receive without talking to the person who provides it.

9.5 Successful transition for those leaving care

- 9.5.1 For many young people, leaving care can be daunting and confusing. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sets out local authorities' responsibility to help children leaving care develop a 'pathway plan' to independence, with the help of a personal adviser and other people who have had an impact on their life. While care can end at the age of 16, it continues until age 18 if the child remains at school. Continuing assistance with education or training continues to the end of the agreed programme, even if it takes some past the age of 21.
- 9.5.2 Care leavers are still over-represented in prison populations and the unemployed, demonstrating that the experience of being in – and leaving – care still does not prepare young people well for adult life. If looked after children followed the same paths as other children into further education, training and jobs, it could save the economy £50m each year.
- 9.5.3 It is also important to remember that although in some cases Cheshire East supports young people past the age of 21, this is only in rare cases. According to the Office of National Statistics more than a third of men and a fifth of women still live at home between the age of 20 and 34. Many cite the lack of affordable housing and increasing financial pressures as reasons for this. It seems unreasonable therefore for Cheshire East in its role as corporate parent to expect its care leavers who are already comparatively disadvantaged to be able to make an unassisted transition to adulthood.
- 9.5.4 The Group were informed that there is a 16 plus Service in place which helps young people to make the transition from care to self-dependence. Making up this team is the independence advisor for young people and an administration support officer. It was explained that key to the work of this team is their ability to liaise with adult services, particularly when they are dealing with a disabled young person, in order to achieve a seamless a transition as possible. Attention was drawn to the electronic recording systems for both children's and adult's services which are incompatible at the current time. This is causing difficulties in terms of information sharing and the Group would like to suggest that a new system is considered.
- 9.5.5 In terms of securing housing, the practice of young people leaving care going to hostels has been superseded by supported lodgings of which there are 12 in Cheshire East. When the young person is older than 18 they are no longer eligible for supported lodgings and therefore they have to access accommodation from housing associations. It was explained that this is often difficult for young people, particularly in Macclesfield and also in terms of securing single person accommodation. It can be seen therefore how important it is to get the corporate parenting strategy embedded as quickly as possible in Cheshire East so that officers in Housing can attempt to start improving this situation.
- 9.5.6 Youth employment is an issue for all young people regardless of background but it is particularly an issue for those young people leaving care. At the moment Cheshire East endeavours to get care leavers onto apprenticeship schemes and there are currently 5 young people on this programme. Attempts are being made to increase these numbers. The Care leaving service also work closely with Connexions which has proven a great success. Unfortunately due to increasing number of Cared for Children and decreasing numbers of staff, this work is getting more difficult. In terms of securing an extra resource, there could be an argument for employing the aforementioned (health section) 16+ youth worker to have a role

that extends beyond just health but encompasses all elements of pastoral care, including employment and housing.

- 9.5.7 Having said this, there are also improvements that Cheshire East could make without any increase in capacity. In the feedback session with the Children in Care Council, the Group were informed how one young person had been offered a job but that they were unable to take it due to transport costs. However, Cheshire East now pay her transport costs to attend college despite it being further away and the young person having the preference to go into employment. It is suggested that more flexibility is sought in how we provide transport subsidies.
- 9.5.8 In addition to this, the session with the Children in Care Council also made the Group aware of the practice of 'sofa surfing'. This is where young people spend a night with a friend in the absence of more permanent accommodation. It was suggested that whilst this is not a desirable outcome, in the interim there could be provided a central facility to which young people can come and use a kitchen, bathroom and washing machine. Such a facility could also be used a place to 'train' young people in how to become independent as part of their pathway plan – something that was noted as being wanted by the Children in Care Council. It was explained that the current facilities at Bradshaw House and Sunnyside are not fit for purpose and that new accommodation would need to be sought.
- 9.5.9 In terms of assisting young people when they go to university, Cheshire East currently pays £90 per week for maintenance. Whilst this is obviously helpful, it is the time away from university, between terms, that can be problematic. Most young people return to the family home for what can be a considerable period and yet this option is obviously not available for young people still in care. When speaking to foster carers, it was suggested that Cheshire East could pay the carer a retainer whilst the placement becomes available as respite in the meantime. This would offer the young person some security for when they return home and reduce anxiety of another change.
- 9.5.10 Furthermore, the foster carers that were spoken to for this review, commented that they felt the service does not use them enough once the young person has left care. It was suggested that they could retain a mentoring role during a transition period.

9.6 Systems and Administrative processes within the Foster Care Service

- 9.6.1 One particular recurring theme of this review, of which there are many, is that there needs to be improvements made to the systems and administrative processes around the fostering service. Indeed, numerous examples have been cited throughout this review such as the placement team linking with marketing, resignations/disruptions being monitored so that this can be fed back to support mechanisms and a multitude of systems around health and cared for children. At the core of all of these is the practice of recording information and then subsequently sharing it in an easily accessible fashion.
- 9.6.2 It was this practice that was the key finding behind Stoke-on-Trent's recent success. Indeed, it was their development of clear and robust performance monitoring systems which allowed for trends to be tracked and provided evidence of success for Ofsted. The Group strongly believes that Cheshire East has some equally good practice which will only improve with the new structure. Therefore, it is vital that Cheshire East can demonstrate this so as to benefit from all the good work and outcomes achieved.
- 9.6.3 Beyond just getting the staff to start recording information more, Stoke-on-Trent facilitated their ability to share information in such a quick and timely way by making sure that all of their relevant staff are based in the same office, with as little hot desking as possible. This ensures that the service is flexible and is able to deal with requests quickly and with all the appropriate information. It also helps them to monitor trends and to plan strategies accordingly. The Group would strongly suggest that such a model is replicated in Cheshire East.
- 9.6.4 The point was also made during the site visit to Stoke-on-Trent, that the only way the Local Authorities can maximise their offer as opposed to IFAs is to make the most of the 'corporateness of the council'. In other words, as local authorities will always pay less than private agencies we must sell the value added by our close partnerships with other authorities such as education and health. Of course, the flip side of this is that Cheshire East must make sure that its partnerships are fully utilised to make good on this promise. The Corporate Parenting Strategy should go a long way to ensure this and the Group would like to add their support for this to be embedded as quickly as possible.
- 9.6.5 What has been mentioned above are some very general observations on how administrative systems and performance monitoring could be improved. During the evidence gathering process, the Group were also made aware of a number of specific examples which require attention.
- 9.6.6 Firstly, it was brought to our attention that there is a situation, known as private fostering in which an arrangement is made to look after a child who is under 16 years of age (under 18 if disabled) for more than 28 days, where the main carer is someone other than the child's parent, legal guardian, step- parent, sibling, grandparent, aunt or uncle.
- 9.6.7 What distinguishes a private fostering arrangement from a public care fostering arrangement is that it is not arranged by nor paid for the Local Authority. Having said this, both the child's parents and the private foster carers have a duty to notify the Children and Families Service of their intention to place the child in private foster care no less than six weeks before and no more than 13 weeks before the arrangement is intended to start (unless it is an emergency –

which case we should be informed no more than 48 hours after the child has been placed).

- 9.6.8 It was reported that it is not always the case that service is notified that the child has been placed with private foster care. This obviously cause for concern as the Authority do not know where the children are. The service is aware of this and has launched a campaign to increase awareness. To go beyond this campaign however, a system needs to be embedded in which links are made with education and health professionals who then flag up concerns over what might be a private fostering situation.
- 9.6.9 Secondly, there was a concern expressed over the lack of communication between the out-of-hours duty desk and the 9-5 duty desk which has resulted in records not being kept as accurately as they could be. Attempts should be made to have both teams working on the same system. Additionally, having all teams in the same office would improve the ability to pass on information without continually depending on systems.
- 9.6.10 Lastly, considering the extent to which Cheshire East are losing Foster Carers due to resignation, it would be germane to conduct exit interviews so that trends could be monitored and analysed with specific areas for improvement then targeted.

9.7 Link with Early intervention Agenda

- 9.7.1 Any child coming into the care of a local authority is obviously an undesirable outcome. It is proven that a child develops best in a loving family environment. Further to this, as has been mentioned throughout this report, resources are becoming scarcer and therefore spread more thinly around an ever increasing cohort of Cared for Children.
- 9.7.2 Consequently, it is vital that the fostering service makes strong and purposeful links with the early intervention agenda. The better the service can identify families at risk, the quicker it can provide support and guidance resulting in less children entering care.
- 9.7.3 For instance, aligned to the corporate parenting agenda, if some parents had better quality housing, it is unlikely that their children would ever come into care. Similarly strong links should be made with the Homestart and SureStart programmes. There are a multitude of other examples of where Cheshire East, with its myriad of skills and abilities throughout the organisation can work to keep children out of care.

10.0 Conclusions

- 10.1 The genesis of this review came from the belief that if a child must be placed under the care of the local authority, the best place for that child, in most situations, is in a family setting. Following three months of careful and extensive research that belief still holds as strong, if not more so. The Group were heartened to find in all cases, professionals who clearly had Cheshire East's children as a priority and who were doing excellent work in continually improving their practice. Indeed, the Group strongly believes that the new structure currently being embedded throughout the service will yield some exciting results in the future months and years.
- 10.2 With this in mind, the Group would like to stress the importance of targeting resources towards the fostering service. Rather than being idealistic, this is a policy that has a strong invest to save business case behind it. Hopefully this review has adequately illustrated the savings available to Cheshire East in increasing its own fostering placements thereby reducing our dependency on expensive IFA and residential placements.
- 10.3 Whilst increasing payments to foster carers to make them as competitive as possible, is an important and central issue for increasing recruitment and retention and thereby making the aforementioned savings, the Group were made aware that Cheshire East will never be able to compete financially with IFAs. Therefore, it is vital that Cheshire East makes the most of its links with other agencies both internally and externally to provide as good a service as possible to its cared for children. Indeed, there is a real need to look at the systems and administrative processes around fostering to make sure we are making the most of our resources.
- 10.4 One issue that does not have a cost attached to it and yet is vital for improving retention is making sure that our Foster Carers feel appreciated and valued. Indeed, there seems in some respects, a tacit understanding of a hierarchical structure in place in which foster carers are seen as separate from other professionals. Whilst recognising that there are distinct differences in roles, the Group would like to see our carers explicitly stated as part of the professional service and indeed, Cheshire East going above and beyond in recognising the service they provide for our most vulnerable children.

11.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 11.1 That all staff involved in the Cared for Children service be situated on a single site, where appropriate.
- 11.2 That in line with the corporate parenting strategy, all corporate policies must consider their impact on cared for children.
- 11.3 That the legacy policy inherited from Cheshire County Council which places the recruitment emphasis on family and friends be reconsidered to concentrate more on mainstream carers in order to increase the pool and range of foster placements.
- 11.4 That Cheshire East continues to provide support and resources for the recruitment of foster carers.
- 11.5 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.
- 11.6 That prospective carers moving through the application process be paired with an experienced carer as a mentor.
- 11.7 That a budget be created 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.
- 11.8 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.
- 11.9 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.
- 11.10 That experienced foster carers be used in delivering training sessions or work shops to make best use of their professional skills.
- 11.11 That a budget be made available for the service to purchase a small library of publications from the Safer Foster Carer Network for the use of foster carers.
- 11.12 That training be provided for the safe handling of Children in Care.
- 11.13 That financial support be maintained for carers attending training events.
- 11.14 That support and resources for the Cared For Children's Support Team be maintained.
- 11.15 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.
- 11.16 That Cheshire East formalises the on-going support that foster carers provide for themselves in partnership with the Cheshire Foster Carer Association.

- 11.17 That the possibility of links being made with the family support service to assist with out-of-hours support for foster carers be investigated.
- 11.18 That the service level agreement with the Cheshire Foster Carer Association for providing an out-of-hours support line be re-commissioned.
- 11.19 That an awards night be established, alongside the Cheshire Foster Carer Association, to recognise the achievements of our Children in Care and the contributions of our foster carers.
- 11.20 That Councillors, in their role as corporate parents, make themselves known to the foster carers in their wards and offer appropriate support.
- 11.21 That a 'starter pack' be produced for each new placement which provides the requisite information about the child/young person and a small, flexible budget.
- 11.22 That support and resources for the Virtual School be maintained including the Personal Educational Allowance, Education Support Fund and educational psychologists.
- 11.23 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.
- 11.24 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.
- 11.25 That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the processes, systems and staffing issues around health and Cared for Children.
- 11.26 That a new electronic recording system be purchased to ensure seamless information sharing between children's and adult's services.
- 11.27 That links are made with Registered Social Landlords to secure decent housing for care leavers, particularly in the Macclesfield area.
- 11.28 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.
- 11.29 That Cheshire East pays a retainer to Foster Carers for keeping open a placement for a young person at university.
- 11.30 That strong performance monitoring systems be put in place and embedded throughout the fostering service.
- 11.31 That exit interviews be conducted on all foster carers who resign from the service and the resulting information be analysed for trends.
- 11.32 That links are made, whenever possible, with the early intervention agenda – particularly with the SureStart programme.

- 11.33 That Cheshire East's payment rates be constantly tracked against and compared to our geographical and statistical neighbours
- 11.34 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.

13.0 Background Information

- 13.1 For Background information relating to this report, please get in touch with the report author:
- 13.2 Mark Grimshaw, Overview and Scrutiny
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At 17/02/11

SCALE OF FEES AND CHARGES 2011/2012			
Update at February 2011			
SERVICE	2010/2011 Current Charges £	2011/2012 Proposed Charges £	Comments
TRANSPORT - CHILDREN'S SERVICES			
16+ Charges for Transport to School			
* Term 1 (Sept)	160.00	190.00	Based on increase of income budget as part of business planning process
* Term 2 (Jan)	160.00	190.00	Based on increase of income budget as part of business planning process
Term 3 (Apr)	95.00	120.00	Based on increase of income budget as part of business planning process
Spare seats for ineligible on school transport contracts			
U16 in zone			
* Term 1 (Sept)	95.00	100.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
* Term 2 (Jan)	95.00	100.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
Term 3 (Apr)	62.00	65.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
U16 out of zone			
* Term 1 (Sept)	135.00	142.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
* Term 2 (Jan)	135.00	142.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
Term 3 (Apr)	100.00	105.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
O16 on zone			
* Term 1 (Sept)	185.00	194.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
* Term 2 (Jan)	185.00	194.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
Term 3 (Apr)	108.00	113.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
O16 out of zone			
* Term 1 (Sept)	250.00	263.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
* Term 2 (Jan)	250.00	263.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
Term 3 (Apr)	175.00	184.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
Denominational charges			
(for pupils ineligible under standard policy but eligible on denominational grounds)			
* Term 1 (Sept)	103.00	135.00	Based on increase of income budget as part of business planning process
* Term 2 (Jan)	103.00	135.00	Based on increase of income budget as part of business planning process
Term 3 (Apr)	93.00	115.00	Based on increase of income budget as part of business planning process
Replacement of passes lost/damaged	13.00	14.00	Increase wef Sept 2011
* Charges are set in advance of the academic year - Sept 2009 and Jan 2010 charges to be reviewed			
SCHOOL MEALS			
Individual schools can set their own prices for paid meals, and the advisory prices set by the Catering Manager are currently being reviewed. However, the intention is to limit the increase to no more than 2.5%. The figures below are indicative only. They reflect a possible increase of 2.5% (rounded to the nearest 5p). However, it may be decided to go for an increase below 2.5% for operational and commercial reasons. The 2011/12 prices are from September 2011.			
Secondary Per meal	2.15	2.25	
Primary Per meal	2.00	2.10	

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