

# Corporate Parenting Committee

## Agenda

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**Date:** Thursday, 27th January, 2022  
**Time:** 4.00 pm  
**Venue:** Council Chamber, Municipal Buildings, Earle Street, Crewe  
CW1 2BJ

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**PLEASE NOTE** –This meeting is open to the public and anyone attending this meeting will need to wear a face covering upon entering and leaving the venue. It is advised that this only be removed when speaking at the meeting.

**The importance of undertaking a lateral flow test in advance of attending any committee meeting.** Anyone attending is asked to undertake a lateral flow test on the day of any meeting before embarking upon the journey to the venue. Please note that it can take up to 30 minutes for the true result to show on a lateral flow test. If your test shows a positive result, then you must not attend the meeting, and must follow the advice which can be found here:

[https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council\\_and\\_democracy/council\\_information/coronavirus/testing-for-covid-19.aspx](https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council_and_democracy/council_information/coronavirus/testing-for-covid-19.aspx)

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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 top of each report.

It should be noted that Part 1 items of Cheshire East Council decision making meetings are audio recorded and the recordings will be uploaded to the Council's website.

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

1. **Apologies for Absence**
2. **Declarations of Interest**

To provide an opportunity for Members and Officers to declare any disclosable pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests in any item on the agenda.

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For requests for further information

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**E-Mail:** [josie.lloyd@cheshireeast.gov.uk](mailto:josie.lloyd@cheshireeast.gov.uk)

3. **Minutes of Previous meeting** (Pages 3 - 6)

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2021.

4. **Corporate Parenting Progress Report** (Pages 7 - 18)

To consider the Corporate Parenting Progress report.

5. **Health of Cared for Children and Young People Annual Report, 2020-2021**  
(Pages 19 - 32)

To consider the Health of Cared for Children and Young People annual report.

6. **Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report, 2020-2021** (Pages 33 - 56)

To consider the Independent Reviewing Officers' annual report.

7. **Cheshire East Fostering Panel and Fostering Service Annual Reports** (Pages 57 - 92)

To consider the annual reports of the Fostering Panel and the Fostering Service.

8. **Changes to time of the Corporate Parenting Committee and Review of the Terms of Reference** (Pages 93 - 98)

To consider a proposal to change the meeting time of the committee and review its terms of reference.

**Membership:** Councillors M Asquith, R Bailey, J Barber, J Buckley (Associate Non Voting Member), C Bulman, P Butterill, K Flavell (Chair), G Hayes, S Handley, S Holland, D Jefferay, D Marren and J Saunders (Vice-Chair)

**CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Committee**  
held on Tuesday, 2nd November, 2021 in the Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,  
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

**PRESENT**

Councillor K Flavell (Chair)  
Councillor J Saunders (Vice-Chair)

Councillors M Asquith, J Buckley, C Bulman, P Butterill, S Holland, D Jefferay  
and D Marren

**ALSO PRESENT**

Annemarie Parker – Head of Service: Cared for Children and Care Leavers  
Keith Martin – Head of Service: Children with Disabilities and Fostering  
Laura Rogerson – Head of Service: Inclusion  
Emma Lawton – Youth Justice Service  
Nicola Booth – Adoption Counts  
Jenny Foulkes – Children’s Society  
Josie Lloyd – Democratic Services Officer

**12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Bailey, J Barber, S Handley and G Hayes. Councillor J Buckley, already in attendance, acted as a substitute voting member for this meeting.

**13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**14 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2021 be agreed as a correct record.

**15 CORPORATE PARENTING PROGRESS REPORT**

The committee received the report which advised how the service was delivering the priorities for cared for children and care leavers as set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

It was noted that the care leavers survey closed last week and that the data from this should be shared at the next meeting.

A question was raised, regarding paragraph 5.6, as to the vaccination figures. It was noted that the vaccination programme had only recently been rolled out in schools but it was agreed that the data would be shared with the committee when available.

A further question was raised regarding paragraph 5.6 and what consideration was given to the wishes of the child when establishing consent for the vaccine. It was noted that this was considered on an individual basis and rationale was being recorded.

A concern was raised regarding staff who were unvaccinated and why this was not a requirement of agency staff. The committee were advised that Cheshire East staff were encouraged to have the vaccine and it was not thought that having the vaccine can be made a requirement for agency staff. It was noted that there was a shortage of care staff nationally. It was agreed that Annemarie Parker would take away a request to check whether having the vaccine can be legally made a requirement when recruiting. Assurances were given that there were risk assessments on children's files where a risk would be posed due to unvaccinated staff.

A question was raised regarding the reporting of NEET figures and it was requested that in future the cohort referred to would be stated alongside the figures in the report.

A further question was raised regarding paragraph 8.5 which referred to the 41% of cared for children who do not live in Cheshire East and whether this was due to a lack of suitable foster carers. It was agreed that a breakdown would be brought back to the committee.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the results of the care leavers survey would be shared at the next meeting.
3. That data on vaccination in cared for children be shared with the committee.
4. That Annemarie Parker take away a request to check whether having the vaccine can be made a requirement when recruiting staff.
5. That future reporting on NEET figures show which cohort they refer to.
6. That a breakdown be brought to the committee of the 41% of cared for children living outside the borough.

## 16 CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21

The committee received the report which advised how the Children's Society has delivered the service over the past year, providing an overview of the work undertaken from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

It was noted that referrals into the service were low although Cheshire East was higher than the national average. A question was raised regarding the target figure for referrals and it was agreed that Annemarie would look into this and share with the committee. An additional question was raised regarding the reason for the lack of referrals and it was agreed that Annemarie would take this away as an area to work towards understanding.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That Annemarie look into the target figure for referrals into the service and share with the committee.
3. That Annemarie take away the request to work towards understanding the reason for the low number of referrals.

#### **17 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED – That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items pursuant to Section 100(A)4 of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1 and 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 and public interest would not be served in publishing the information.

#### **18 VIRTUAL SCHOOL HEADTEACHER'S ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21**

The committee received the Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report for 2020-21.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted and endorsed.

#### **19 YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE PRESENTATION**

The committee received a presentation on the Youth Justice Service.

RESOLVED –

That the presentation be noted.

#### **20 ADOPTION COUNTS ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT AND ADOPTION PANEL CHAIRS' SIX MONTHLY REPORT**

The committee received the Adoption Counts Adoption Service Annual Report and the Adoption Panel Chairs' Six-Monthly Report.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

The meeting commenced at 16:00 and concluded at 18:30

Councillor K Flavell (Chair)

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*Working for a brighter future together*

## Corporate Parenting Committee

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<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	27 January 2022
<b>Report Title:</b>	Corporate Parenting Progress Report
<b>Report of:</b>	Kerry Birtles, Director of Children's Social Care
<b>Ward(s) Affected:</b>	All

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<b>Corporate Plan Priorities</b>	<b>Open</b>	An open and enabling organisation	
	<b>Fair</b>	A council which empowers and cares about people	X
	<b>Green</b>	A thriving and sustainable place	

### 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report advises the Corporate Parenting Committee of how the service is delivering the priorities for cared for children and care leavers which are clearly set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

### 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This report provides the eighth update to the Corporate Parenting Committee since the restrictions of Covid-19 came into force. Services for cared for children and care leavers embraced new ways of working in the initial stages of the pandemic. We have come some considerable distance since this time and have developed hybrid ways of working to mitigate the risk of Covid-19 and enable services to be delivered in line with our statutory responsibilities.

### 3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Corporate Parenting Committee is asked to:
- Note the contents of the report
  - Provide support and challenge to the local authority actions in respect of the report.

**4. Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1. The Corporate Parenting Committee is an advisory group to the Children and Families Committee and, as such, needs to be aware of any national or local issues that are likely to impact on cared for children and care leavers.
- 4.2. The Corporate Parenting Committee needs to be able to scrutinise and challenge performance to improve outcomes for cared for children and young people and care leavers.

**5. Other Options Considered**

- 5.1. None; this is an update report.

**6. Background**

- 6.1. This report provides an update to the Corporate Parenting Committee since the last report which was presented on the 2 November 2021. Frontline services and strategic leadership continue to deliver our statutory duties in line with our Corporate Parenting Strategy and in response to the pandemic.
- 6.2. The impact of the pandemic continues to be visible service wide. Children's Services, statutory partners and the third sector continue to identify new and repeating demand within our ChECS service (Cheshire East Consultation Service). We have seen a significant increase in children with disabilities and care experienced adults requiring additional support, and where children meet a legal threshold of being at risk of significant harm, there are continuing delays due to the Court capacity in achieving timeliness. However, statutory and support services have, and continue to, support our most vulnerable children and young people and success is visible in many areas and monitored by a whole service action plan and robust performance monitoring process.
- 6.3. We continue to build upon the success of 26 adoptions in 2020/2021 and to date we have achieved permanence via adoption for a further nine children. There are 30 children currently with a Court endorsed plan of adoption of which 17 are placed within their prospective adoptive families. Our trajectory for these children is to achieve permanence within these adoptive families, however we are still experiencing significant delays within the Court arena and the availability of hearings is contributing to our performance around timeliness. The local authority continues to challenge this through its participation at the Local Family Justice Board.
- 6.4. The impact of Court availability continues to cause delay for children during permanency planning in pre and public law proceedings. Q2 performance analysis offers reassurance that following this level of intervention children are more likely to conclude with a permanency plan to remain within their family network, which again is an extremely positive outcome. However, lengthy care proceedings are not best practice for children and young

people and the impact of Court delays is impacting on frontline capacity and overall demand in frontline teams.

- 6.5. Cheshire East, like other areas across the country, has seen an increase in Covid cases amongst our school age children and young people. Our frontline staff continue to use risk assessments before they visit families to ensure that face to face visiting is safe; it is hoped that this will reduce the impact of Covid and ultimately ensure that we continue to deliver a high level of service to our children and young people. The corporate response to promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion throughout the pandemic for the families who access our services and the frontline colleagues who deliver them has been well received.
- 6.6. At the time of writing this report (December 2021) the government is announcing new measures in response to growing cases of a new variant of the Coronavirus. We will continue to monitor the impact and will adjust ways of working to reflect any new measures.
- 6.7. As the government begins to roll out vaccines for children and young people, we have taken advice from Public Health England (PHE) in respect of our responsibility as Corporate Parents. Children and young people aged 12 to 15 years are beginning to have their vaccinations in schools.
- 6.8. Children's Social Care have seen success in recruitment and retention of frontline colleagues with a running position of less than 10% agency social workers in frontline teams and an overall vacancy rate of 5%. Our new Executive Director for Children's Services, Deborah Woodcock joined Cheshire East on 22 November 2021. We are delighted that Deborah has joined us, she has a wealth of experience and knowledge.
- 6.9. We are pleased to share with you two pieces of good news regarding the outcomes of recent inspections of children's services in Cheshire East. The first is the outcome of our two-day Ofsted inspection visit in November 2021, which focused on our arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. The feedback and [letter from Ofsted](#) recognises the improvements we have made in this area and helpfully supports us in future developments. This is a great foundation for us to continue in our journey for improvement.
- 6.10. Ofsted summarised that since their last inspection in November 2019 the quality of social work with children and their families has improved and senior leaders are successfully embedding a child-centred culture.
- 6.11. The letter goes on to say that children in Cheshire East benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with their social workers and they have frequent opportunities to express their wishes and feelings. Social workers also feel supported by managers and leaders, they have a comprehensive training plan, and enjoy working in Cheshire East.
- 6.12. The council's '@ct team' who provide support for children at risk of exploitation or family breakdown were also praised for the positive impact

they have on these children to ensure that they remain with their families when possible and when it is appropriate.

- 6.13.** The letter also makes some recommendations for further improvements. It says that family networks are often explored to offer immediate support for children and families, but contingency plans could be better for longer term support. It goes on to say that most managers have frequent oversight of social work with children and their families, but this could be more regular for disabled children.
- 6.14.** Additionally, the letter says “caseloads are high in some teams that work with children in need of help and protection. Despite this, the quality of practice continues to be such that, for most children, there is no detrimental impact.”
- 6.15.** All of the feedback from the inspection will be carefully considered and will be incorporated into a development plan and will be presented to Children and Families Committee early in 2022.
- 6.16.** The second piece of good news is that the Cheshire Youth Justice Service has been rated as ‘Good’ following a visit by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation. A number of our frontline colleagues were spoken to as part of this inspection and this demonstrated good practice and joint working across agencies to support some of our most vulnerable young people.
- 6.17.** Committee members will be aware of the ongoing crisis in Kent and other port authorities in the South-East caused by the arrival of small boats crossing the English Channel. This has now had a direct impact on the way in which unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) find their way to Cheshire East. Until early last year, the majority of our UASC were spontaneous arrivals who had crossed over in lorries and vans before being dropped off at service stations on the M6; however, increased security at the French ports has made this route much more difficult and has driven the criminal gangs who run the trade to switch their activities to the boats, sometimes with the tragic consequences that were seen in November.
- 6.18.** In the summer of last year, Kent Council said that it could no longer safely care for any more migrant children and this led to an appeal to local authorities to offer more help; accordingly, we accepted a number of direct transfers from port: one in September 2020, one in December 2020, and two in June 2021. In July of this year, a revised National Transfer Scheme was launched using a voluntary rota and we accepted three more young people: one in July and two in October 2021. Most recently of all, the number of boats crossing the Channel forced the Home Secretary to mandate the transfer of young people from the South East using powers that already existed in the 2016 Immigration Act. We accepted our first mandated transfer as recently as 6 December 2021, who is now safely in the care of a Cheshire East foster family.

- 6.19.** We are currently responsible for 24 UASC as cared for children, and 27 as care leavers. However, we can now expect these numbers to rise significantly given that the ceiling (of 0.07% of our total child population) that the Home Office uses to calculate our allocation represents a total of 54 cared for children (care leavers being excluded from these numbers).
- 6.20.** Mark Riddell, National Advisor for Care Leavers for the DfE, visited Cheshire East and met with the Care Leavers Service and some of our partner agencies on 19 November 2021. This was a really successful visit, and he was impressed with the work that is being undertaken. Mark stated that he regards Cheshire East as one of his top half dozen 'go to' authorities and it was therefore essential that we were able to give a good account of our offer to our young people and our commitment to them as their Corporate Parents. As a result of the visit, Mark has spoken with the Children's Minister and they want to visit Cheshire East in March 2022. This will be another valuable opportunity to showcase our offer to care leavers.

**7. Pledge 1 - Being a Good Corporate Parent**

- 7.1.** We are currently developing a new Corporate Parenting Strategy ready to launch in 2022. We plan to review and refresh the Corporate Parenting Strategy over the coming months, to be launched alongside the new Children and Young People's Plan in Spring 2022. We have consulted with a small cohort of children and young people and they have told us that the pledges remain current and appropriate. We will however identify new and ambitious priorities within each pledge. We are also mindful of how we truly capture children and young people's views, and we are working with our Participation Team to ensure that this feedback is meaningful and inclusive.
- 7.2.** The Participation Team are now visiting more children in their placements to seek their views and wishes and to promote participation events. We have achieved some success in our young people agreeing to participate in frontline staff recruitment, particularly interviews. We are also giving further consideration as to how we can provide our children and young people with further opportunities to be involved in service development and give them reassurance that we are listening to what they tell us.
- 7.3.** Since the last Committee meeting, the young people attending My Voice have written to a national company called Madlug. Madlug was created under the premise that that no child should carry their life in a bin bag or plastic shopping bag. Madlug operate under a 'buy one, give one' model, which means that with every Madlug bag that is purchased, a pack-away travel bag will be given to a child in care. My Voice applied to Madlug who have now kindly donated 180 packaway bags to be given to children and young people in Cheshire East. We are committed to ensure that our children and young people have appropriate luggage for their belongings.
- 7.4.** Following the presentation at the last Committee by the Children's Society and questions from members, we have further considered how we are promoting advocacy and the Independent Visiting Service. A mandatory question is now being added to cared for statutory review paperwork, this

will generate a discussion for each child and young person and active consideration will be given (at least twice per year) as to whether they would benefit from an advocate or an independent visitor.

**7.5.** The Participation Team and the Care Leavers' Service were involved in running in several activities for November Children's Rights Month. These included photography competitions, a Crystal Maze activity day and a trip to Alton Towers. These activities were run in conjunction with Pure Insight and Just Drop In. Feedback from young people involved in these activities is positive.

**7.6.** The Care Leavers' Survey has now closed, and the information gathered from this is now being collated and analysed and will be presented in the next update report. However early indications suggest that we have almost doubled the number of participants from the 2019 survey. A number of young people indicated through the survey that they would be willing to be involved in some focus groups around service development. Our Participation Team are now busy contacting these young people and planning to set up some focus groups in the new year. This will be a great way to engage our young people in the development of services which affect them directly.

**8. Pledge 2 – We will improve Education, Employment and Training outcomes**

**8.1.** The Virtual School and the Care Leavers' Service attended an employer event on 18 November 2021 - this was a virtual event with 46 employers attending. The event enabled those employers who have successfully offered employment and apprenticeship opportunities to care leavers to share their experience. The event was very well received by employers with many contacting 'The Pledge' to offer their support to care leavers. From the 48 employers, The Pledge have so far received 15 pledges from employers. A further meeting is taking place on 10 December 2021 to highlight which employers have offered a pledge and the details of those employers will be shared with the relevant local authority to follow up. Three local authorities took part: Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington. 30.8% of employers who attended were from Warrington, 23.1% from Cheshire West and Chester and 15.4% from Cheshire East.

**8.2.** Our not in education, employment or training (NEET) figures are continuing to show improvement, despite the pandemic, and our current performance for young people aged 16 to 25 is 37% NEET. We are continuing to work to improve this further and have a range of targeted support in place to address this including a specialist role via the Journey First project and a dedicated NEET programme. The NEET course commenced on 5 October 2021 and six young people are fully engaged with the programme. Feedback from the participants is extremely positive and planning in the new year will commence to ensure that the programme can be offered again in the spring.

- 8.3. We currently have 18 young people at University, this is our highest number ever and we are proud and want to ensure that as many of our young people have this opportunity as possible.
- 8.4. We are carefully monitoring the impact of Covid upon children and young people's education and attendance. The Participation Team and the Virtual School have worked together to seek feedback from our cared for children and young people about the impact of Covid upon their education. The results of this survey are currently being analysed and will be shared in subsequent reports. At the beginning of December 2021, the attendance figures for our school-aged children was 91%. It is reassuring that our most vulnerable children are attending school despite the rising numbers of Covid. We would also like to celebrate that we have had no permanent exclusions for the past three years.

**9. Pledge 3 - Achieving Permanence and Keeping Children Safe**

- 9.1. Achieving permanence for cared for children and care leavers is one of our service priorities and we have a clear plan to ensure that the children who require local authority care receive this in a timely way, that the care they receive is excellent, and for children who no longer need to be in care, that their plans are progressed without delay. We also have regular liaison with Cafcass to ensure that we are working together so that plans for children are progressed.
- 9.2. There has been a significant reduction in the number of children placed at home and subject to Care Orders; our current cohort of children is 56 and is continuing to reduce with further cases before the Court for discharge of Care Orders. Like Q1, Q2 has seen no new Care Orders at home granted by the Court. We are promoting the use of alternative orders that support children to remain within their own families without the intervention of the local authority sharing parental responsibility, such as Supervision Orders or Child Arrangement Orders. This means that we have the right children in care and this approach is supported by the [Public Law Working Group Publication](#), a priority for the Local Family Justice Board.
- 9.3. The number of children and young people who go missing from care continues to vary from month to month. We continue to undertake audit work to ensure that the service we commission to offer return home interviews to these children is effective and is reducing the risk and frequency of missing episodes. Data in respect of children who go missing is shared across all services on a daily basis from the allocated social worker to the Director. There are a small number of children who regularly go missing, however we understand their individual circumstances and there is a high level of scrutiny to ensure that we offer a multi-agency response. There are two young people who have been missing following a period of care less than 24 hours. These two children were unaccompanied asylum seeking children and we continue to make multi-agency attempts to locate them and they remain cared for children responsible to Cheshire East. We continue to work closely with 'We Are With You' on the connectedness between their service and the allocated social worker.

- 9.4. We are continuing to see progress in our vision for children and young people living in the borough, where we believe their needs will be best met and we continue to develop a range of sufficiency options including our bespoke children's homes and our Mockingbird constellations. Q2 data shows that another ten children have been placed in borough since Q1. We are currently undertaking a review of all children who live out of borough to ensure that they are not disadvantaged because of this.
- 9.5. Members will be aware following an accelerated procurement process to recommission two further homes, one home was successfully awarded to Safe Places. Safe Places are now in the process of registering this home with Ofsted. This means that we can provide homes to our most complex children within Cheshire East, and they can be effectively supported by partner agencies. Flude House, one of our bespoke children's homes has recently been inspected by Ofsted and was judged Good.
- 9.6. We are continuing to focus on reducing the number of children who live in residential care. Our Q2 data shows that a further six children have moved out of residential care. Some children have been able to return to the care of their families. We want to give children and young people the opportunity to live within a family setting wherever possible. For some children, this will mean that we need to commission bespoke packages of support and we are being creative and working with families to ensure that these children have the support they need to ensure that this 'step-down' is successful, and they don't return to care. We currently have two young people who are being provided with creative packages of support by providers who are not yet registered with Ofsted. These arrangements are described as unregulated children's homes and we continue to work with the Court and with transparency with our regulator Ofsted about taking appropriate steps to safeguard these children, promote their outcomes and make provision for registration of these settings.
- 9.7. The number of children placed with our in-house fostering service has reduced. Work is underway with the fostering service to consider how we can improve our offer to children and young people and recruit new foster carers particularly for our older children. There is a national shortage of foster carers currently and we are looking at how our recruitment campaigns target the right people to ensure that our fostering service grows and develops and is able to meet the needs of the children and young people who require foster homes.
- 10. Pledge 4 – We will Improve Health and Wellbeing Outcomes**
- 10.1. Performance in relation to requests for initial health assessments, completion of initial health assessments, and annual review health assessments, continues to show that health assessments for children and young people are delivered with a continued improvement in timeliness. We monitor this data on a weekly basis to ensure that the timeliness of health assessments for children remains good.

**10.2.** Our cared for children and young people aged 12 to 17 years have been receiving Covid vaccinations in line with the national roll out. School nurses have been delivering on this vaccination programme. Where children have not been able to have their vaccine at school, a plan is in place to 'mop up' and ensure that as many children as possible have their vaccine. Latest figures for children within Cheshire East aged 12 to 17 indicates that there has been a 46% take up of the vaccine. We are in the process of gathering data in respect to how many cared for children and young people have had their vaccine and will provide an update within the next report.

**11. Pledge 5 – We will Prepare Young People for Adulthood**

**11.1.** The Care Leavers' Service continues to be focused on supporting the needs of our care experienced adults in relation to accommodation, NEET, social isolation, emotional wellbeing, and relationships.

**11.2.** We are very proud of Cheshire East Council's commitment to our care leavers. The council has covered the £20 cut to Universal Credit for six months from October 2021 for all young adults who receive the benefit and our 16 and 17 year olds in supported accommodation, a total of 125 young people. This has been exceptionally well received by our care leavers and Mark Ridell, National Advisor for Care Leavers.

**11.3.** Pure Insight, who deliver mentoring and wellbeing support to our young people aged 16+, continue to offer a range of support to our care leavers. The staff and volunteers work with our young people on an outreach basis. Feedback from young people around the support they receive from Pure Insight is overwhelmingly positive. Pure Insight attended the meeting with Mark Riddell.

**11.4.** Over 97% of our care leavers are in suitable accommodation and we are in touch with these young people. There are four young people who choose not to engage with the service, but we know where they live and they know they can change their mind if they need support. This is a really positive picture.

**12. Consultation and Engagement**

**12.1.** There are a range of surveys currently being drafted. These are aimed at seeking feedback from children and young people about the service they receive.

**13. Implications**

**13.1. Legal**

**13.1.1.** The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 were introduced to provide flexibility in the statutory obligations of local government relating to cared for children, adoption and fostering. These regulations lapsed on the 30 September 2021 and for local authorities the

flexibilities in relation to virtual visiting and changes to fostering and adoption assessments are no longer an option.

**13.2. Finance**

- 13.2.1. Financial plans are due to be reviewed to ensure that the service can continue to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people in Cheshire East and are reflected in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy forecast.

**13.3. Policy**

- 13.3.1. Cheshire East is ambitious and committed to ensuring it is a great place to be young and every child has the best start in life. This is demonstrated through the council's core priority that we are a council which empowers and cares about people. These priorities are supported and driven through the Children and Young People's Plan, Corporate Parenting Strategy and the Health and Wellbeing Strategic Plan. Our Corporate Parenting Strategy has a clear vision that our cared for children and care leavers are safe, happy, healthy and achieve their full potential.

**13.4. Equality**

- 13.4.1. Cared for children and care leavers can be a vulnerable group because of their experiences and so the impact of Covid-19 could mean further marginalisation.

**13.5. Human Resources**

- 13.5.1. HR and Public Health have been supportive of officers in ensuring that robust risk assessments are in place and available to staff in undertaking their duties.

**13.6. Risk Management**

- 13.6.1. Cared for children and care leavers are a vulnerable group that are at risk of a number of factors, including poor education and training, health, safeguarding and transition into adulthood; the Corporate Parenting Strategy prioritises these areas.

**13.7. Rural Communities**

- 13.7.1. All communities are affected by the contents of this report and it is necessary to strategically plan the delivery of services to serve all communities.

**13.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children**

- 13.8.1. The contents of this report have implications for cared for children and care leavers, who are some of Cheshire East's most vulnerable children.

**13.9. Public Health**

**13.9.1.** The impact of Covid-19 is well documented within this report.

**13.10. Climate Change**

**13.10.1.** There is a commitment to ensure that Cheshire East cared for children live as close to their home community as possible, whenever this is safe to do so. This will ensure that children can continue to feel connected to their families and local community. It also reduces the geographical footprint of children, families and staff as travel is reduced.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Annemarie Parker – Head of Service, Cared for Children and Care Leavers <a href="mailto:Annemarie.parker@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Annemarie.parker@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a>
Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	<a href="#">Ofsted Inspection Letter December 2021</a>

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## BRIEFING REPORT

### Corporate Parenting Committee

**Date of Meeting:** 27 January 2022

**Report Title:** The Health of Cared for Children and Young People Annual Report, 2020-2021

**Report of:** Shân McParland, Designated Nurse Looked After Children

<b>Corporate Plan Priorities</b>	<b>Open</b>	An open and enabling organisation	
	<b>Fair</b>	A council which empowers and cares about people	X
	<b>Green</b>	A thriving and sustainable place	

#### 1. Purpose of Report

1.1. This report outlines the delivery of health services to children in the care of Cheshire East Council (CEC) during the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. It reviews performance indicators, clinical work undertaken by the Wirral Community Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust Cared for Children Health Team, service improvements and plans for further development.

#### 2. Executive Summary

2.1. This report outlines the delivery of health services to children in the care of Cheshire East Council (CEC) during the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. It reviews performance indicators, clinical work undertaken by the Wirral Community Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust Cared for Children Health Team, service improvements and plans for further development.

### 3. Background

- 3.1. This annual report aligns with pledge four within the Corporate Parenting Strategy ***'We will improve health and wellbeing outcomes'***.
- 3.2. The Clinical Commissioning Group also has a statutory duty to comply with requests from a local authority to help them provide support and services to cared for children and young people which promote their health and well-being.

### 4. Briefing Information

- 4.1. The aim of the Cared for Children Health Service is to ensure that children in the care of Cheshire East Council have their health needs identified and addressed. This includes the provision of a detailed, high quality initial health assessment (IHA) when received into care and a statutory review health assessment (RHA) annually for children over five years of age and 6 monthly for those under five years of age.
- 4.2. The team works in partnership with Cheshire East Council and local health providers to ensure that appropriate services are developed and maintained to continue meet the health needs and improve the health and wellbeing of all cared for children and young people originating from Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group area.

### 5. Implications

#### 5.1. Legal

- 5.1.1. Legal advice will be sought, as appropriate, upon all relevant emerging issues.

#### 5.2. Finance

- 5.2.1. There are no direct financial implications of this report.

#### 5.3. Human Resources

- 5.3.1 There are no direct human resource implications of this report.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Shân McParland, Designated Nurse Looked After Children
Appendices:	The Health of Cared for Children and Young People Annual Report, 2020-2021
Background Papers:	None

**The Health of Cared for  
Children and Young People  
Annual Report  
April 2020 – March 2021**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report covers the period from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. It is written to provide assurance to the Governing Body and our partners that NHS Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group is meeting the statutory requirements in commissioning services to identify and meet the health needs of the cared for children population of Cheshire East. It is produced in line with duties and responsibilities outlined in the 'Statutory Guidance on Promoting the Health of Looked after Children (LAC): Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, Clinical Commissioning Groups and NHS England' (2015); The Children Act (1989) and The Children Act update (2004); and Looked After Children: knowledge, skills and competence of healthcare staff (Intercollegiate Role Framework, 2020).
- 1.2 NHS Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group are committed to working with partner agencies to ensure the safety, health and well-being of all the cared for children and care leavers in East Cheshire. Recognised as the most vulnerable in our society, it is essential that we ensure safe and effective services are delivered with a focus on quality and patient experience, and with the key priority of enabling every child to go on to achieve their full potential in adulthood.
- 1.3 This report sets out the range of activities, developments, achievements and challenges that our cared for children team have been involved in across Cheshire East, and identifies key service priorities for 2021-22.
- 1.4 We want to first recognise the global pandemic COVID-19 affected everyone in the Cheshire community. The harm caused by the pandemic has been profound and distressing, and this has been exacerbated by the effect of the lockdown on usual social activity – socialising, schooling, shopping, going on holiday, and going to work. The effect on the public services has, at times, been almost overwhelming as the capacity to manage the impact of the pandemic has been tested to breaking point.

## 2. CARED FOR CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS

- 2.1 Looked after children are those that are looked after by the local authority, either voluntarily or through a statutory order granted in court. In Cheshire East, looked after children are referred to as 'cared for children', in line with their wishes.

## 3. THE RESPONSIBLE COMMISSIONER

- 3.1 NHS Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group are the responsible commissioner of health services for children and young people who are taken into the care of Cheshire East Local Authority. When children are placed out of area it is the responsibility of the local authorities as lead agencies to notify NHS organisations to ensure that these

children and young people maintain access to relevant health services. This includes the originating Clinical Commissioning Group and the receiving Clinical Commissioning Group in the area where the child or young person has been placed (Department of Health 2015).

- 3.2 In Cheshire East, whenever a child or young person is moved to an area outside the Clinical Commissioning Group boundaries, a formal transfer of information is completed by the Cared for Children Health Team and sent to the team with responsibility for the health of looked after children in the receiving area.
- 3.3 Responsibility for requesting, monitoring and quality assuring review health assessments for children and young people placed out of area remains with the Cared for Children Health Team in Cheshire East.

#### **4. REDUCING UNWARRANTED VARIATION FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN (LAC)**

- 4.1 *'There is unwarranted variation across England in the quality of the arrangements in health services for child safeguarding and for looked after children. These are some of society's most vulnerable children'* (Not Seen, Not Heard. Care Quality Commission. 2016).
- 4.2 NHS England and NHS Improvement have identified reducing unwarranted variation for looked after children as a key area of focus. The primary areas of unwarranted variation are:
  - Access to timely and quality health services regardless of where looked after children are placed in the United Kingdom.
  - Health commissioning pathways to meet the statutory duties for all looked after children are complex and there is no single service specification for delivery across the regional and national footprint.
  - Access to mental health services for looked after children and care leavers.
  - Structures and systems to support healthcare teams are not always in place, and vary across the United Kingdom.
- 4.3 Throughout 2020-21, work has continued across the Cheshire footprint to address these issues. The health system, together with the local authorities as 'Corporate Parents,' have high aspirations to improve outcomes for these children and young people.

## 5. CARED FOR CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVER ACHIEVEMENTS AGAINST PRIORITIES FOR APRIL 2019 – MARCH 2020

5.1 **Table 1** below demonstrates our actions and achievements against the 2019/2020 priorities including actions against those still in progress or not yet complete.

**Table 1: Actions and achievements against the CCG 2019/2020 priorities**

2019/20 Priorities	We have
To ensure that NHS Clinical Commissioning Group continue to meet all the statutory responsibilities and are compliant with the Accountability and Assurance Framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updated the commissioning standards to include all new legislation and guidance and gained assurance that health providers are achieving the required looked after children and care leaver standards.</li> </ul>
Review of the arrangements for Initial Health Assessments: the current arrangements for the notification of a child entering care, requesting an initial health assessment and recording completion are fragmented due to the different processes in place with different providers. This needs to be reviewed and consideration given to streamlining the process to reduce the risk of breaches of statutory timescales.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewed and updated the Initial Health Assessment processes for children coming into the care of Cheshire East.</li> <li>• Provider arrangements for the completion of Initial Health Assessments remain unchanged however this will be prioritised for review during 2021-22.</li> </ul>
Annual quality assurance visit to provider services to be completed by Designated Nurse: This will serve to provide assurance to the Clinical Commissioning Groups that the services provided meet statutory requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality Assurance visits were suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions.</li> <li>• During this year monthly virtual meetings and quarterly reporting of key performance indicators has been maintained to gain assurance.</li> </ul>
Review of the health summary document, and pathway for completion, for care leavers. This is a priority area for development during the first half of 2021-2022.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care leavers health summary documents has been subject to a preliminary review and opinions of young people have been sought.</li> <li>• Further work on this will continue during 2021-22. Children and young people will be invited to participate in developing a new document and process.</li> </ul>

2019/20 Priorities	We have
<p>Improving services for looked after children as required by Promoting the Health and Wellbeing of Looked after Children: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, Clinical Commissioning Groups and NHS England (2015): To increase the performance and quality of health input for children in care and care leavers by regularly monitoring the timeliness and quality of all health assessments. To ensure that NHS Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Groups and commissioned health providers across the health economy continue to meet all statutory duties for cared for children and care leavers. In partnership with the local authority and key partners continue to ensure that Corporate Parenting principles and overarching strategy is embedded across NHS Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Groups and the wider health economy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work has continued throughout 2020-21 to improve health services for our cared for children population. Timeliness of health assessments has been monitored closely, and concerns escalated when appropriate.</li> <li>• The Designated Nurse has been an active member of Cheshire East Corporate Parenting Committee. The Annual Report for the Health and Wellbeing of Cared for Children and Care Leavers has been presented at the Committee meeting.</li> <li>• Membership of the NHS England North Region Designated Nurse’s Looked After Children Networking Group has been maintained. The work undertaken within this group has ensured the sharing of best practice across the region, and enabled service improvement.</li> </ul>

## 6. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS: INITIAL HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

- 6.1 It is a regulatory requirement throughout England that each looked after child has a comprehensive health assessment (initial health assessment) and a health care plan in place prior to the first looked after children care plan review which takes place at 20 working days from entry to care. The initial health assessments are completed by paediatricians.
- 6.2 The quality of completed initial health assessments is monitored by the Designated Doctor for Cared for Children and any quality concerns are raised directly with the practitioner who completed the assessment. The Designated Doctor provides annual training for the doctors in the department and provides supervision on a one to one basis if needed. Any training grade doctors performing initial health assessments will receive training and supervision before and after completion of the assessment to ensure a good quality assessment. The Designated Doctor has a requirement to receive Level 5 safeguarding training.
- 6.3 There has been a shared initial health assessment pathway in place for use by health and social care practitioners since 2013. The pathway includes details of the

timescales for notification by Children's Social Care to community paediatricians to ensure initial health assessments are completed within statutory timescales. Timely notification to health services is crucial to support the completion of high quality health assessments for children coming into care within statutory timescales. This pathway is continuously reviewed to ensure it remains relevant to the local authority and each provider.

- 6.4 Requests within two working days received from Cheshire East Council for the completion of initial health assessments during 2020-2021 has been above 60% for each quarter which is significantly improved from previous years. Requests are triggered by a notification that a child has entered care. In the event of a late request being received by either of the two providers, every effort is made to ensure that the Initial Health Assessment is still completed within 20 working days. This will remain a priority area of focus and partnership working will continue throughout the coming year to identify and address the reasons for late initial health assessment requests including escalation to the team managers within the local authority.
- 6.5 Prompt completion of an initial health assessment is essential to ensure identification of a child or young person's health needs, and when delayed there is the risk that health issues remain unaddressed. There is a potential for this risk to increase when a child is placed a considerable distance outside the Cheshire East footprint. The initial health assessment pathway has been reviewed to ensure that there is clarity regarding the arrangements for requesting a health assessment for a Cheshire cared for child when they are placed out of area, and further work to strengthen this arrangement continues on an ongoing basis as processes adapt and change.
- 6.6 Themes have been identified by the providers as reasons why initial health assessments are completed outside the statutory timescale. In addition to late requests from the local authority, other reasons recorded include cancelled appointments because children have been unwell or on holiday, children declining appointments or not attending without explanation. The Designated Nurse escalates all issues relating to either late requests or children not being brought to appointments to the child's social worker for action. If this is not actioned in a timely manner the Designated Nurse for Looked After Children will escalate to their manager so further action can be taken. Initial health assessment performance data is also a standing item on the agenda at the Health and Local Authority Partnership meetings which are held bi-monthly and provide opportunity to analyse data and identify areas where improvement is required.
- 6.7 During Quarter 3, 2020-21, there was a reduction in the timeliness of completion of initial health assessments within Cheshire East. This was due to a number of factors including reduced clinic capacity due to sickness and medical staff self-isolating within COVID-19 requirements. Also to note, this included a period where the country

returned to a national lockdown. In order to address this issue additional capacity was identified and the outstanding initial health assessments completed.

**Table 2: shows the comparison of completed initial health assessment percentages in Cheshire East**

	Initial Health Assessments completed within 20 days (100% target)			
	Quarter 1: 2020/21	Quarter 2: 2020/21	Quarter 3: 2020/21	Quarter 4: 2020/21
Cheshire East	90%	93%	47%	73%

6.8 We will continue to work collaboratively to achieve our aspiration of ensuring that all children entering care are supported to have their health care needs identified and met in a timely way, and this will continue to be a priority during 2021-22. The primary focus for action will be around:

- Review of the pathway to escalate late initial health assessment requests which is shared across Cheshire East.
- Central tracking within the Clinical Commissioning Group all Cheshire East children brought into care and monitoring of timescales from request to completion of initial health assessment.
- Greater scrutiny of cancelled appointments or those that children are not brought to without explanation. Information regarding any missed appointments will be escalated to senior local authority managers.
- Programme of education and training for social care staff and carers by health practitioners in order to ensure the initial health assessment process and pathway is understood, and the relevant documentation, supporting information and referral letters are completed.
- Exploration of new ways to arrange initial health assessments utilising a single point of contact within the local authority and the providers. This would help in reducing the number of teams handling and processing data, and the number of steps required to manage the whole process.

## 7. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - REVIEW HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

7.1 The local authority must ensure that every child and young person in their care has an up-to-date individual health plan, the development of which should be based on the written report of the health assessment. The health plan forms part of the child's overall care plan. Children under the age of 5 years must have a review health assessment

twice in a twelve month period, whilst children age 5 years and above have their health needs reviewed annually.

- 7.2 Review health assessments for Cheshire East cared for children are generally carried out by health visitors, school nurses, family nurses and sometimes by community paediatricians (if the child has complex health needs and is already under regular review by the community paediatrician).

## 8. TIMELINESS OF REVIEW HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

- 8.1 Statutory timescales are in place for the completion of review health assessments. This is monitored via the data included in the quarterly Safeguarding Assurance Framework provided by Wirral Community Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust. The data demonstrates that timeliness of the completion of review health assessments has improved significantly for Cheshire East cared for children during almost every quarter year on year.
- 8.2 The process for completion of review health assessments was reviewed in response to the social distancing requirements due to COVID-19. Health assessments were offered virtually as an option for young people and it was evident that this approach was preferred by some. Health assessment completion rates for young people age 16+ improved and virtual assessments will continue to be offered.
- 8.3 The data in **Table 3** demonstrates that during 2020-21, cared for children placed out of area were more likely to experience their review health assessment being completed late. It is recognised that there is often some difficulty in influencing timescales for completion of review health assessments when a child is placed in another area, and a review of the escalation pathway halfway through 2020-21 was completed to address this issue. Work to improve this performance indicator will include close scrutiny and monitoring to ensure that our cared for children are receiving timely, high quality statutory health assessments irrespective of where they are placed.

**Table 3: Percentage of Review Health assessments completed within timescale in Cheshire East**

Cheshire East	Quarter 1 2020-21	Quarter 2 2020-21	Quarter 3 2020-21	Quarter 4 2020-21
Children placed in area	92%	85%	93%	71%
Children placed out of area	82%	74%	64%	67%

## 9. THEMES IDENTIFIED DURING HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

9.1 Throughout 2020-21, themes identified at health assessment have remained consistent with previous years and include:

- Emotional wellbeing, including difficulties relating to attachment and previous trauma
- Mental health disorders
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Sleep problems
- Smoking and substance use
- Complex physical health needs
- Social and communication difficulties
- Exploitation
- Missing from home episodes
- Self-harm.

9.2 **Gaps/Risks identified:**

- Specialist support services for attachment difficulties
- Mental/ emotional health support for care leavers up to age 25 years
- Accessing health services for our cared for children placed out of area
- Notification process for children placed in Cheshire East by other local authorities
- Engagement of some children and young people with the current health assessment process.

## 10. DENTAL CHECKS

10.1 It has been recognised that access to dental checks has been a challenge nationally since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has had a significant impact on the percentage of cared for children who have been seen by a dentist for their annual dental check. At the end of 2020-21, only 35% of our Cheshire East cared for children who had been in care for more than 12 months had been seen by a dentist compared to 75% reported the previous year.

10.2 In addition, there can be difficulties with obtaining and reporting on dental data due to both the number of dental practices that cared for children are receiving treatment from, and the lack of a single method for collecting the information. A more accurate and consistent method of reporting is being explored with local authority colleagues to address this issue.

10.3 **Table 4** below indicates the percentages of cared for children who were up to date with their dental check on 31 March 2021, and the four years before. Whilst it is

evident that performance in this area has reduced significantly compared to previous years, it is recognised that a large proportion of this drop can be attributed to the difficulties in accessing dental services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 4: Percentage comparison from 2016 to 2020 of cared for children who have visited a Dentist**

Date	Cheshire East cared for children who have visited a dentist	National data
31/03/2017	80%	83%
31/03/2018	85.2%	84%
31/03/2019	75.7%	85%
31/03/2020	75.3%	86%
31/03/2021	38%	40%

## 11. IMMUNISATIONS

- 11.1 National data relating to the year 2019-20 for immunisations is 88%. Local data analysis indicates that on 31st March 2021, 94% of cared for children in Cheshire East who had been in care for twelve months or more had received their age appropriate immunisations.
- 11.2 It is anticipated that there will be challenges during 2021-22 with maintaining performance at this level as due to the COVID-19 pandemic there was a temporary halt to the National Childhood Immunisation Programme across the country.

## 12. DEVELOPMENTAL CHECKS

- 12.1 Compliance with the healthy child programme is excellent and the performance indicator for the percentage of cared for children who have had a developmental check in line with national requirements was 100% in Cheshire East.

## 13. CARE LEAVERS HEALTH SUMMARY

- 13.1 All young people who leave care when they reach their 18th birthday should receive a summary of their health history. During 2020-21 the Nurse Specialists have continued to develop an effective system for ensuring that young people are leaving care at the age of 18 years with a meaningful, relevant summary of their health history. Engagement has been successful in a large proportion of cases and has involved an innovative and constantly evolving approach to access even the most hard to reach young people. At the end of 2020-21 there were 61 young people reaching their 18th birthday in Cheshire East and they all received a care leavers health summary.

## 14. UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKERS

14.1 During 2020-21 the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children has remained relatively steady within Cheshire East. It is recognised that many of these young people have experienced significant adverse life events both within their countries of origin, and during their journeys to the United Kingdom. The resulting physical, emotional and mental health needs of this group of young people can be particularly complex and specialist support services are frequently required.

14.2 In Cheshire East a welcome pack was developed by the Specialist Nurse 16+ and Transitions last year which provides comprehensive health advice and guidance on accessing services. During this year graphics and translation of this resource has been completed and it is being given to young people on their entry to care.

## 15. CHILDREN IN CARE PRIORITIES APRIL 2021 – MARCH 2022

15.1 **Table 5** below demonstrates our Clinical Commissioning Group priorities in 2021/2022.

2021/22 Priorities	How we will do it	Timescale
Continue to review the arrangements for initial health assessments: the current arrangements for the notification of a child entering care, requesting an initial health assessment and recording completion are fragmented due to the different processes in place with different providers. This needs to be reviewed and consideration given to streamlining the process to reduce the risk of breaches of statutory timescales.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with providers and local authorities to review current arrangements and develop processes which simplify and streamline, reducing opportunities for delay of notification or allocating appointments within statutory timescales.</li> </ul>	June 2021
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Designated Nurse will develop a proposal for redesign of current initial health assessment arrangements.</li> </ul>	December 2021
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Designated Nurse will track initial health assessments for all children brought into care across Cheshire and challenge any issues regarding timeliness.</li> </ul>	May 2021
Annual quality assurance visit to provider services to be completed by Designated Nurse: This will serve to provide assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Designated Nurse will complete quality visits to specialist nursing teams in both providers.</li> </ul>	January 2022

2021/22 Priorities	How we will do it	Timescale
to the Clinical Commissioning Groups that the services provided meet statutory requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A report and action plan will be produced following quality visit which will be reviewed quarterly.</li> </ul>	March 2022
Development of an effective tool that can be used to measure health outcomes for cared for children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Designated Nurse will work with colleagues across the North region within the Regional Looked After Children Designated Nurses Network Group.</li> <li>• Introduction of a system to collect and record health information relating to individual children during the health assessment quality assurance process.</li> </ul>	<p>March 2022</p> <p>March 2022</p>
Review of the health summary document, and pathway for completion, for care leavers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A group to include children and young people to be established in both local authority areas to review current document and agree changes required.</li> </ul>	December 2021
Development of a robust system to ensure effective tracking and monitoring of both Cheshire looked after children placed out of area, and looked after children placed in Cheshire by other local authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current notification systems across health and local authorities to be reviewed.</li> <li>• Pathway to be agreed which assists with identifying those children and young people at risk, and addressing risks identified.</li> </ul>	<p>June 2021</p> <p>September 2021</p>

## 16. RECOMMENDATIONS

16.1 The information contained in this report demonstrates that we continued to ensure robust commissioning arrangements are in place for safeguarding, and continued important work with partners to support service development, delivery and governance arrangements.



*Working for a brighter future together*

## BRIEFING REPORT

### Corporate Parenting Committee

**Date of Meeting:** 27 January 2022

**Report Title:** Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report, 2020-2021

**Report of:** Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services

<b>Corporate Plan Priorities</b>	<b>Open</b>	An open and enabling organisation	
	<b>Fair</b>	A council which empowers and cares about people	X
	<b>Green</b>	A thriving and sustainable place	

#### 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The report gives an overview of the activity of the team of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) who review the care plans of our cared for children in the last business year from April 2020 to March 2021. The report is a requirement defined in the IRO Handbook 2011 and should be published by every local authority each year.

#### 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The report summarises the review activity in the year of 2020-2021 in comparison to the previous three years and provides an outline of qualitative and quantitative information relating to cared for reviews and pathway plan review activity. The report also provides an outline of the legal context of the statutory role of the Independent Reviewing Officers.
- 2.2. As required, contained within the report is a summary of activity relating to our quality alert and dispute resolution process which every local authority is required to have in place to ensure independent oversight and challenge of

any concerns in relation to social work practice in relation to cared for children.

- 2.3. The report concludes with a summation of what we achieved in relation to our aspirations in the previous year and identifies our areas of focus for the following business year.

**3. Background**

- 3.1. The Independent Reviewing Officer team have an important role in supporting the delivery of our responsibilities as Corporate Parents through oversight of the plans of cared for children and care leavers.

**4. Implications**

**4.1. Legal**

- 4.1.1. There are no legal implications.

**4.2. Finance**

- 4.2.1. There are no finance implications.

**4.3. Human Resources**

- 4.3.1. There are no human resource implications.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Nabeel Chaudhry <a href="mailto:Nabeel.chaudhry@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Nabeel.chaudhry@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a>
Appendices:	Independent Reviewing Officers (Cared for Children) Annual Report 2020-21
Background Papers:	None



Cheshire East

# **TOGETHER** for Children and Young People

*Together we will make Cheshire East a great place to be young*

## Independent Reviewing Officers (Cared for Children) Annual Report

April 2020 – March 2021



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## Introduction

This report is a reflective overview of activity and performance in Cheshire East in respect of our cared for children and young people. It covers the period of April 2020-March 2021 and provides information about the performance and practice of the Independent Reviewing Officer Team in relation to the monitoring and review of care planning in Cheshire East. Additionally, it reports on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in relation to quality assurance through the Practice Alert and Dispute Resolution Policy.

## Statutory role and legal context

The appointment by local authorities of an Independent Reviewing Officer is a statutory requirement. Their purpose is to ensure that the care plan for a cared for child fully reflects the child's needs, and that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration, and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's statutory responsibilities towards them.

The Children and Young Person's Act 2008, followed by revised care planning regulations and guidance which came into force in April 2011, strengthened the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer. The statutory duties of the IRO are to [section 25B (1) -1989 Act]:

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case
- participate in any review of the child's case
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case
- are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

As corporate parents each local authority, through their officers and councillors, should act for the children they care for as a responsible and conscientious parent would act. There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of an Independent Reviewing Officer:

- chairing the child's review; and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

The Independent Reviewing Officer Team in Cheshire East sits within the Children's Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. The service is managed independently of children's operational social work and is therefore offering a level of independence that enables the service to effectively challenge plans, arrangements, and the practice of the local authority. The strategic lead for the service reports directly to the Director of Children's Social Care. Independent Reviewing Officers and their managers are not involved in preparing a child's care plan, management of the case, operational decision making and/or allocation of resources to cared for children.

The Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of local authorities in establishing an *effective* Independent Reviewing Officer service.

The legislative framework regulating services of Independent Reviewing Officers (Children and Adoption Act 2002, Children and Young People Act 2008, IRO Handbook 2010 and Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010) imposes a specific set of statutory duties which all IROs are expected to execute to improve outcomes for the children in public care, it specifies that IROs should:

- be social work professionals with at least five years post qualifying front line practice and supervisory/ managerial experience
- ensure that children's views are heard, they are aware of their rights and entitlements and receive relevant services and support
- consult children before reviews to keep their views and input central to the whole review process (particularly during the review meeting)
- maintain overview and promote meaningful consultation with parents, carers and others with significant involvement with the child and ensure they are involved, and their views have been considered in relation to the care planning and review

- monitor the local authority's management of the child's case at any time
- attend any significant meeting or other type of review for the child
- identify and challenge drift, delay and underperformance and make attempts to resolve them in a timely manner

## The Team

The team of Cared for IROs in Cheshire East increased in 2019 to reflect the increase in children cared for and consists of 10 IROs covering 9.5 posts and the Fostering IRO (FIRO) overseen by the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Cared for Manager. There are six female IROs and three males, two IROs are from the BAME community, two IROs are of mixed heritage and the remaining are White British.

In relation to the children in care we serve, this provides a diverse team; at the time of writing there are 518 cared for children, approximately 80% are white British with the other 20% from a variety of other ethnic or mixed backgrounds. At the time of this report, there are more boys than girls in our care with boys representing approximately 54% of the cared for population.

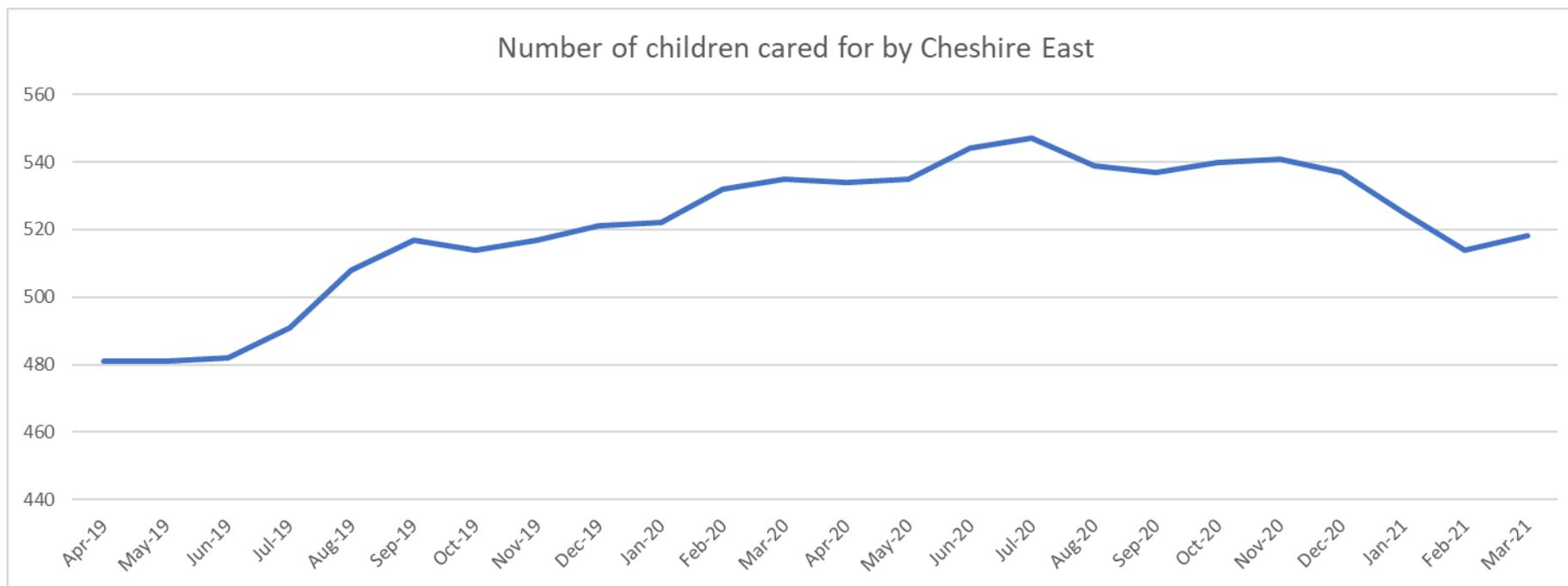
The team are settled and made up of eight permanent members of staff including one member of the team who has been employed for over eight years, four employed for

over four years with two members of the team who have been with us for two years. At the time of this report, we have an agency IRO who has been with us for 18 months due to high caseloads, and to cover a period where we end our involvement with the majority of over 19-year-olds as planned and discussed in the previous report.

Caseloads at the end of the business year were around 67-75 but the team have experienced some instability this year due to the long-term absences of two IROs, which has brought additional pressure as cases had to be covered by the remaining team. Caseloads over the year have fluctuated in line with the number of children in our care but

have remained broadly slightly above where we would like to be in relation to recommended levels, as outlined in the IRO Handbook.

The graph below depicts the number of children in our care at the end of each month over the past 2 years. The graph demonstrates a gradual climb and then recent reduction in cared for children over the past two years.



# Executive Summary

## What has gone well?

We have chaired 1415 cared for reviews and 353 pathway plan reviews this year. This is an increase of 45 reviews over the year reflecting the increase into care during the year, despite the reduction of over 18's pathway plan reviews being covered by our service as more over 19's are reviewed by the care leavers service.

- Child and young people participation in their review - rates remain high at 98%
- On average 68% of children attended their cared for reviews and 53% of over 18's attended their Pathway Plan reviews
- 96% of all reviews were held in statutory timescales - a 5% increase on last year
- We continued to hold all reviews despite COVID-19 restrictions moving them online to virtual meetings where possible or completing them as series of discussions via phone calls using technology to ensure these were conference calls if Microsoft Teams was not available
- We held a focus group with some of our cared for children in January 2021 who gave feedback about our service and their experiences
- We continue to write a letter to each child following their review as a record of their meeting, these have been well received with positive feedback from children and young people

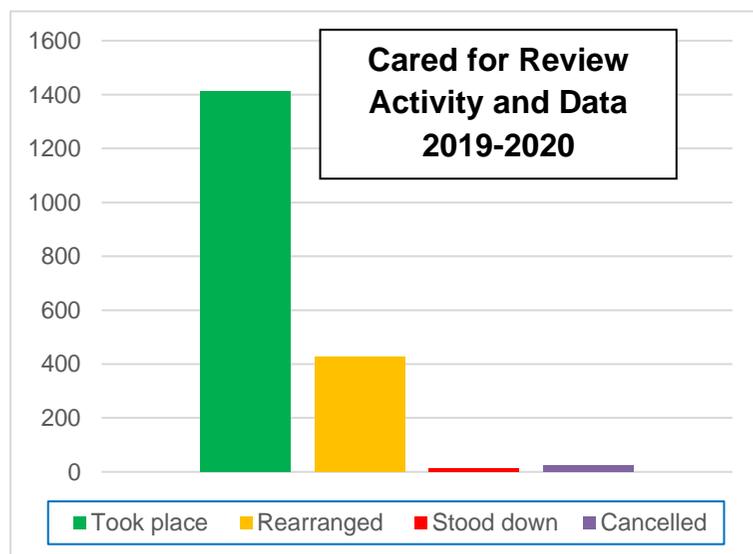
- IROs began visiting children again in the Autumn of 2020 making essential visits to meet children new to their caseload or where the child had requested the visit. Since January 2021 visits have increased to see children across their caseloads.

## What are we worried about?

- Whilst child participation in their review remains at a high level of 98%, and actual attendance at their review has increased to an average of 68%, we remain keen to improve attendance figures and respond to the feedback received
- The Cared for Children Survey indicated that of the 77 children who responded to the survey 23% were uncertain about the purpose of their cared for review, social workers and IROs need to ensure when we visit or consult with children, we help them understand this is their meeting and support them to attend or even chair the meeting if possible
- Staff sickness has meant some reviews had to be covered by IROs who were not known to the children
- Sufficiency of placements is a continuing cause of concern regarding achieving stability and permanency
- Timeliness of adoption plans impacted by COVID
- COVID-19 restrictions placed some difficulty in enabling IRO visits to take place during lockdown and restricted working arrangements as the visits are not deemed essential – consultations therefore had to be via Teams or telephone

- Whilst the use of technology established some better communication with our older children in care, we are concerned it did not always allow full participation of those younger children in care who we would normally meet
- Less placements were visited during the past year due to COVID-19. Whilst IRO visits are not statutory this did impact on their ability to understand what the placement was like for the child
- Continuing to build strong relationships with children social care staff, social workers and managers ensuring complimentary support, whilst maintaining scrutineer and challenge role

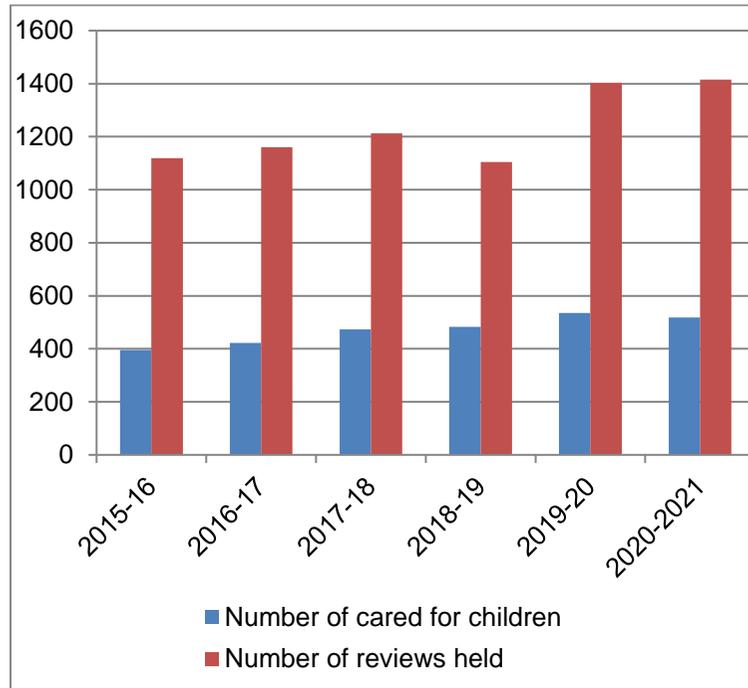
## Review Activity



## Cared for Reviews 2020-2021

- Of the total 1415 cared for review meetings planned to take place in this business year, 30% were rearranged to new dates from the originally agreed date. There can be multiple reasons for rearrangement, including request by child or carer due other commitments, request by social worker due to needing to be in court on another case or a request by the IRO themselves due to sickness or due to the case being re-timetabled in court proceedings. The percentage of rearranged reviews has reduced by 5% but remains higher than would be appropriate for a statutory meeting of importance to the child. This is a good reflection of independent reviewing officer's engagement with allocated social workers and strong performance.
- Less than 1% of cared for reviews were stood down this year however many rearrangements have been found to allow time for new social workers to complete the care plan rather than standing down the review.
- Cancellations remain very low and are related to change in legal status when a child leaves care and a review is cancelled.

**Cared for Review Activity comparison for the last 6 years**



**Review activity 2020-2021 – Cared for Children (under 18)**

The performance this year of number of reviews compared to number of children remains very similar to the previous year. Generally, most cared for children will have an average of three reviews a year particularly if they are in care proceedings, once settled they have two reviews a year in line with statutory timescales and this will only

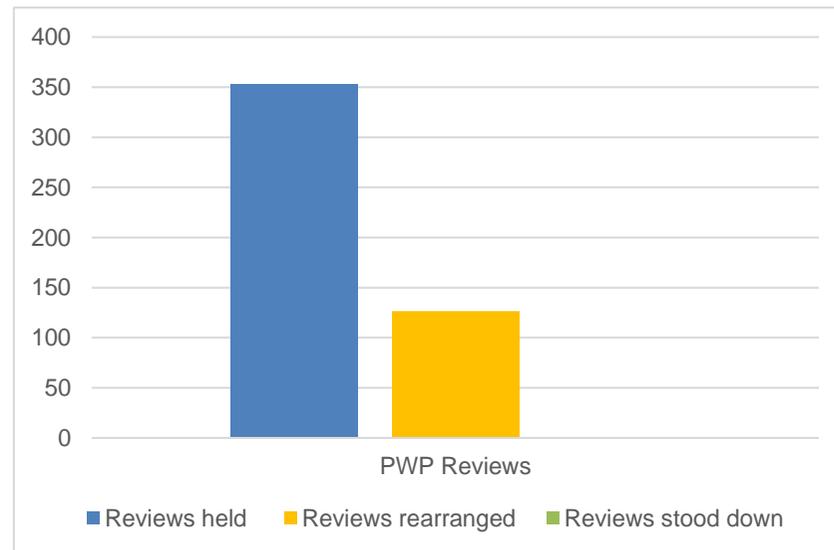
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increase should a child have a lot of placements moves when a review is needed each time they move.

**Reviews held in timescale**

In the past business year 96% of reviews have been held in timescales which is a great improvement on the 88% of the previous year and reflects the hard work and commitment of the Independent Reviewing Officers in a difficult year where some added pressures of working from home and home- schooling of their own children might have brought a different outcome. However, with less travelling time and more flexibility in terms of how the review were completed using technology performance has improved.

**Pathway Plan Review Activity for over 18's**



## Pathway Plan Reviews

### Pathway Plan Reviews 2019-2020

There were 353 Pathway Plan meetings planned for this year and of those 82 were rearranged; this is a percentage of 23% which is an improvement on last year when 35% of Pathway reviews had to be rearranged. This may be an improved picture due to lockdown and the availability of both young people and personal advisors to complete the review remotely

No Pathway Plan reviews were stood down this year.

## Annual Reviews

A very small number of children in Cheshire East have annual reviews, where it has already been ascertained that Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is not appropriate or possible. They are children who are all in very settled placements who have requested less visits and intervention. Regular risk assessments are carried every six months to indicate whether an annual review remains appropriate, and should there be any concerns, any significant event, or if the child enters transition planning with a Pathway Plan, then reviews revert to six-monthly. Last year no children had annual reviews and all children had at least two reviews carried out virtually due to the pandemic.

## Participation in Reviews

We continue to have a high rate of participation from children and young peoples in their reviews consistently achieving between 98% this year as an average which is an improvement again on last year.

Participation can be through completion of consultation documents, providing views via an advocate or their carers, or attendance at the review meeting.

We remain concerned at the figure we are achieving for actual attendance at the review and have sought feedback from a small group of young people to understand what that is about. These young people indicated that they do not like attending any meeting and do not see their review meetings as different, they wish to be normal and their friends do not attend review meetings, they like meetings if they do attend to be informal and not to involve too many people. They also fed back that they enjoy the use of Teams, WhatsApp and other technology to gain their views.

Most will meet via Teams or the telephone to have a consultation with their IRO - it is sometimes just the actual meeting they wish to avoid. They have also advised by meeting with their IRO they feel they have been to their review and so we are looking at how we capture that involvement in our data to fully represent what they see as attendance and what we might call consultation.

## Consultation

As part of the review process IROs are required to consult with the child or young person, their parents, their carers, as well as education and health or any significant agency involved in their care plan. Figures for return of consultation documents remain low and do not necessarily represent the true picture. For example, whilst foster carers may not always complete the consultation form, they attend the review and will report verbally instead.

Despite changes to the consultation forms following consultation with our health and education colleagues response rates have actually reduced in the past business year. This may in part be due to the way reviews are being held and arranged virtually as this sometimes means the consultations are sent by email separately and we then do not always receive a response. It has also removed the ability to hand a written document over at a review as sometimes happened.

The quality of the consultation is generally good and assists and supports the IRO to ensure views of others are fully noted in the review. It also supports a more holistic overview of how the child's care plan is meeting their needs.

This will be an area for work for the service this year to see how we may achieve better consultation results and ensure colleagues who contribute to the review, as well as parents

and family are not placed at any disadvantaged in the way we are working.

Recorded Invites/Consultation Forms sent out					Black 18/19 Green 19/20 Blue 20/21
Young people	Health	Education	Parents	Foster/Home	Other
680 655	536 492	641 589	695 652	679 530	447 356
259	365	435	340	221	218
Recorded Consultation Forms received					
Young people	Health	Education	Parents	Foster/Home	Other
85 (13%) 70 (10.6%)	164 (31%) 153 (31%)	249 (38.8%) 160 (27%)	87 (12.5%) 61 (9.3%)	197 (29%) 145 (27%)	29 (6.4%) 29 (8.1%)
17 (6.5%)	103 (28%)	153 (35%)	38 (11%)	48 (21)	39 (7.8%)

## Dispute Resolution and Practice Alerts

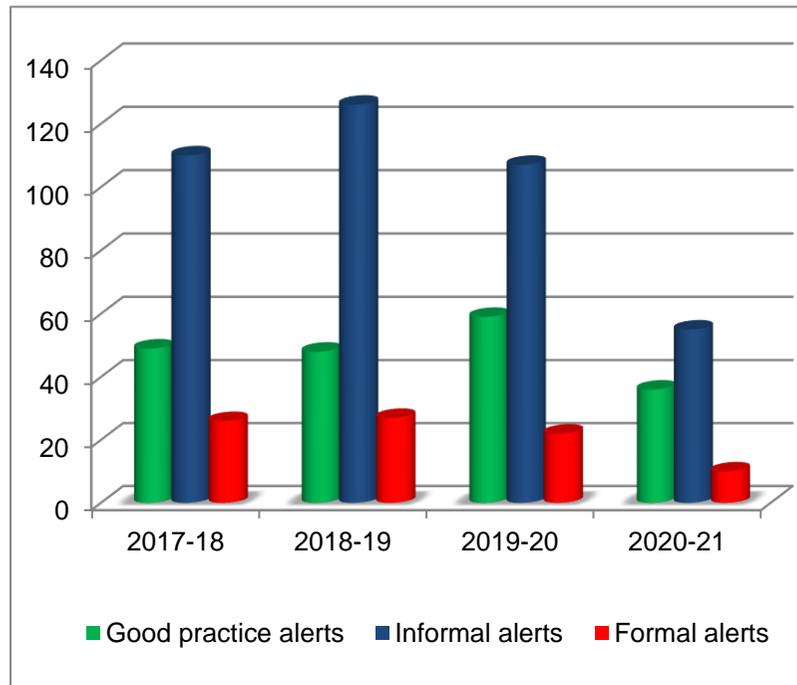
One of the key functions of the statutory role of the IRO is to seek resolution to any problem or disagreement arising out the care planning process. It is a core part of their role to scrutinise practice and challenge the Local Authority to ensure good and timely outcomes for children. To do this, IROs must establish good working relationships with social workers and their managers to be able to affect a good dispute resolution process and with good support of this process by senior managers. Alongside this responsibility, IROs in Cheshire East also have a role in identifying good practice so learning from what works well for children and young people can also be understood and replicated.

The IRO Handbook, legislation, and guidance around the planning for cared for children requires local authorities to ensure they have a good formal dispute resolution system in place. Whilst this may look different in each local authority all systems must have a 20-day maximum time limit to resolve any disagreement from the beginning of the process to its conclusion. In Cheshire East this commences with an informal practice alert being raised by the IRO with resolution at this level within 5 working days with the team manager. If this is not achieved, then the IRO will escalate to a formal practice alert allowing a further 10 days to reach resolution with a senior manager. If there is still no agreement after 15 days, then the IRO may escalate the concern to Cafcass.

What is going well?	What are we worried about?	Future focus
<p>Good practice alerts represented 35.6% of all practice alerts raised - this is an 4% increase on last year. Most good practice alerts related to good working relationships with the child and their family.</p> <p>There has been a slight decrease in disputes raised at the formal level compared to last year. This year formal alerts represent 9.9% of all alerts raised compared to 12% last year</p>	<p>One third of formal alerts raised at the informal alert stage did not reach a satisfactory outcome within the agreed timescales.</p> <p>16% of informal alerts this year relate to no care plan updated or the plan not being ready for the child's review.</p> <p>32% of informal alerts have related to there being no updated assessment to inform plans.</p>	<p>The importance of a child's care plan needs to be recognised by all involved with a child in care from day one of their care story. It is the basis of our intervention and the most important document relating to the child. The plan needs to be informed by an updated assessment and we need social workers to better understand the link between these documents.</p>

<p>Following introduction of the new protocol we have seen a reduction in practice alerts for compliance issues this year.</p> <p>Many IROs indicate relationship-based practice allows for discussion and resolution at an early stage which is captured in case notes.</p>	<p>This year has not been a clear representation of activity due to agreements put in place initially due to COVID where it was agreed in March and April disputes would be resolved via discussion and no alerts would be raised as social workers were mainly working from home with less support available to them.</p> <p>In a number of cases reviews have been rearranged rather than stood down with a practice alert being issued. Whilst this may reflect flexibility being used to support social workers it is not necessarily in the best interests of the child/ young person as this leads to a delay in the review taking place from the original date agreed.</p>	<p>We need to find ways across the services to highlight this issue and encourage social workers to understand the care plan is an evolving and continuously moving document which should reflect the updated assessment and planning for the child at each review.</p> <p>Informal alerts need to be resolved to prevent escalation to formal level; formal disputes should mainly be about disputes in the final care plan or a significant safeguarding concern, others matters should be resolvable at a lower level.</p> <p>IROs need to consistently raise practice alerts for reviews that cannot take place due to lack of preparation to recognise delay caused for the child – a peer audit will take place to improve consistency.</p> <p>Many issues are resolved via discussion and we need to seek a way to measure this using the practice alert case note if this has been the case.</p> <p>Consideration of themes to aid practice improvement once protocol is reviewed at end of June.</p>
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### Practice Alerts received between 2017-2021



## Themes

### Good Practice Alerts

This year most good practice alerts relate to good working relationships either with the child or the family, often the alerts are raised where it is a newly allocated social worker who has made considerable efforts to build relationships quickly in order to progress the child’s plan. In at least two cases good working relationships have been established

with parents who had difficult relationships with a previous worker. There is one example where exemplary practice has been recognised both by the IRO and the Guardian within court proceedings. Another example relates to an example of a good Child and Family assessment as part of an exercise to identify good examples for the principle social worker.

### Informal Alerts

The figures for informal alerts in the first half of the year are reduced due to the service level agreement not to raise alerts in the first three months of the March 2020 lockdown but to resolve concerns via discussion; this was to reduce pressure for social workers already working in more difficult circumstances. Alerts overall are fewer following the introduction of the new protocol in December which focused on areas of practice where there was a direct impact for the child rather than issue of compliance.

During a difficult year of practice with COVID there have been challenges with changes of social workers in some teams. This has led to IROs being reluctant to raise practice alerts and instead have continued to resolve difficulties via discussion instead. Whilst this reflects good relationship-based practice it minimises the ability to show effective challenge by the IRO Team.

## Formal Alerts

There were 10 formal alerts raised in total throughout this year; three related to matters that could not be resolved at informal level and were escalated to the service manager before they were resolved as they related to resources and therapeutic input.

One formal alert related to concern for partnership working in relation to a child with disabilities who had experienced considerable delay in respect of his living conditions at home, this was escalated as resolution could not be found at team manager level and it was necessary for heads of service to become involved to raise concerns with partner agencies.

Another formal alert was raised for a family who had entered care where family dynamics were such that the children were not adequately placed with relatives leading to flux and drift in their care plans under Section 20. In this instance following discussion at service manager level it was agreed it was in the children's best interests to enter public proceedings for the local authority to hold parental responsibility as parental alienation prevented Section 20 from being effective.

All formal alerts raised are good examples of resolution reached which was in the best interests of the child and where it was clear there were obstacles leading to lack of response of delays in planning which needed the oversight of senior managers.

## The impact of the role of the IRO in Cheshire East – Feedback from children and young people to ensure quality in our practice

Following a year of working in a different way we sought feedback from a small group of our cared for children and young people. The children were consulted by two IROs in January 2021. The consultation found that our children are individuals and like to communicate their views in different ways. Some children like attending their reviews, others like communicating over video call or the telephone and some like to fill in consultation booklets. This confirmed that it's important that IROs know the children they review well including how they like to communicate so that they are given the support to participate as much as possible in their review and care planning.

We received further feedback from the Children in Care Survey carried out by the Participation Team. The following findings from that survey have been shared and discussed to inform and improve our practice.

The survey found that of the 77 children who responded to the survey about their cared for review, 72% were very clear about the purpose of their review, however 23% did not really know the purpose review.

79 children responded to the question about attendance at their cared for review:

- 30% always attended
- 44% sometimes attended their review
- 26% never attended.

Among the reasons given for not attending were that they:

- did not know about the meeting
- did not like meetings
- preferred one to one discussions.

Some children believed their review took place when they were at school possibly being confused with their Personal Education Planning meetings.

The children were asked what they wanted their IRO to do in terms of their review their answers included:

- Make the social worker listen to my views
- Make it more about me
- Keep it the same
- He does really well - don't change
- Make sure things get sorted
- My IRO is fantastic don't change
- Keep the meetings online
- Keep the meetings in person

The survey has led to planning to widen our offer to children and young people as to how they wish to complete their review, to ensure we recognise individual wishes and

needs and meet these as much as possible despite ongoing restrictions on our working practices.

We also recognise there is still much to do in making sure children fully understand the meetings and process around them when they are cared for and what we as IROs can do to ensure that the meetings we hold are meaningful for the children we support and review. We have found it beneficial to ensure children and young people have the choice of making their own two outcomes or recommendations from each review.

We continue to have a role in ensuring a child can challenge their care plan or indicate if they are unhappy with aspects of their plan. In Cheshire East the IRO can direct a referral to the independent advocacy service (The Children's Society) to support the child or young person to challenge their plan and if required support them via the advocacy service to seek their own independent legal advice.

## Progress on plans from last year's report

Priority team objective	Impact statement (when you achieve this what will the impact be for children, young people and their families)	Measures of success	Actions needed to achieve priority objective	Update on plan
<p>Relevant Children's Social Care Objective:  <i>We will reflect, learn, and continuously improve our practice to provide an excellent service for children and young people</i></p>				
<p>We will improve on our offer of how we consult with children offering them a variety of means to engage in reviews including the annual foster care reviews</p>	<p>Children's views will be evident in recording of reviews</p> <p>Two outcomes from each review will be provided by the child and will be followed up to ensure they are met at the subsequent review</p> <p>Peer reviews will take place to ensure consistency across the team using child participation as a theme</p>	<p>The child's voice will be evident in the review process in the outcomes from the review</p> <p>Letters to children will be personal and reflect the relationship built between IRO and child or young person</p> <p>Fostering reviews will not need to be stood down as children's views will be prioritised</p>	<p>Provision of options to the child ahead of the review</p> <p>Face to face meetings</p> <p>Microsoft Teams consultation</p> <p>WhatsApp consultation</p> <p>Fostering Portal implementation for ease of access</p> <p>Revision of consultation templates for children wishing to provide views in writing</p> <p>Access to advocacy</p> <p>The Fostering IRO will work with fostering improvement</p>	<p>This objective has been achieved in most reviews children do opt to make their own recommendations some children have declined this option</p> <p>We are not yet at the point of exchanging information via the fostering portal for our reviews</p> <p>We have seen an increase in children's view obtained for the foster carers review</p>

			to ensure cared for children's views are obtained early for fostering reviews	
<b>Relevant Children's Social Care Objective:</b> <i>We will safely and appropriately reduce the number of cared for children</i>				
<p>We will review plans for children including consideration of those who could safely return to live with their families</p> <p>We will track those children awaiting discharge of care orders and raise formal disputes for those where resources are delaying their plan</p>	<p>We will see an increase in children being able to return safely to their families where care is no longer required</p> <p>Children will not remain in care and will achieve better outcomes by living in their families if safe to do so</p> <p>There will be a reduction in missing from home for those children who seek out their family and where it is assessed they can safely live with that family member if necessary, with support provided</p>	<p>Care numbers will reduce, and caseloads will reduce leading to better oversight by the IRO team</p>	<p>Good IRO oversight of children's plans</p> <p>Scrutiny of those children coming into care in regular audits to ensure it was the best decision</p> <p>Clear Children and Family assessments available to ensure the IRO is fully informed of the family situation</p> <p>Clearly identified support plans to ensure any return home is sustainable and will provide permanency</p>	<p>The impact of COVID-19 on the business of the family court has caused some delays. Courts have not been able to prioritise these cases. Whilst some children have successfully returned, we remain focused on ensuring no drift for this cohort.</p>
<b>Relevant Children's Social Care Objective:</b> <i>We will achieve a permanent, safe home for children, young people and care leavers as early as possible.</i>				
<p>Focus on achieving permanency at the 4-month review and evaluation of children's plan to</p>	<p>Children will achieve early permanency with fewer placement moves</p> <p>All options will be considered early in planning including</p>	<p>More plans of permanency will be achieved by the four-month review</p> <p>IROs will identify any gaps in the Children and Family</p>	<p>IROs to ensure a mid-point review between the initial review and the 4-month review to ensure outcomes have been addressed</p>	<p>Data for achieving permanency at 4-months remains low and fluctuating. The average at the year-end was around 25% achieving permanency at the 4-month</p>

<p>ensure the plan is SMART</p> <p>Fostering Annual Reviews will be held on time and will be more robust following review of the process and update of the forms.</p> <p>To ensure children are living safely in good fostering homes that meet their needs by carers who are skilled and trained and meet regulations</p>	<p>the option of Special Guardianship to a connected person where possible</p> <p>Outcomes for children will be good with early identification of where they should safely live in order to have stability</p> <p>Children will feel safe and secure in their fostering settings</p> <p>There will be fewer placement breakdowns as reviews will highlight support needs or concerns</p>	<p>Assessment at the first review</p> <p>IROs will identify family members to be considered at the first review</p> <p>Foster carers will feel supported and well trained and will be resilient providing safe stable placements</p>	<p>The quality assurance checklist completed on each new case will give opportunity to highlight any missing information such as a genogram to enable good preparation for the review</p> <p>IROs to raise practice alerts should a permanency plan not be achieved at the 4-month review due to practice below agreed standards</p> <p>Fostering IRO to feed into fostering review</p> <p>Fostering IRO supporting policy updates in fostering</p> <p>Fostering IRO supporting implementation of new LiquidLogic workflow and forms</p> <p>Fostering IRO supporting improvement in participation of children in the fostering annual reviews</p>	<p>review. This is likely to reflect in some cases drift and delay in the court process as issues such as drug testing and alcohol testing to rule parties in or out have been delayed</p> <p>Performance around fostering reviews (annual review of foster carers) has improved significantly a quarterly report is now produced to track all reviews and ADM decisions</p>
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**Relevant Social Care Objective:**  
*We will reflect, learn, and continuously improve our practice to provide an excellent service for children and young people*

<p>Strengthen the quality assurance role of IROs and Fostering IRO to challenge social workers' and supervising social workers' practice that impacts on outcomes for children through use of quality assurance forms, practice alerts and dispute resolution as well as audit activity</p>	<p>Practice will improve across the service and there will be less delay in achieving children's plans</p> <p>Placement stability will increase</p>	<p>Children will have more timely outcomes and plans will be achieved without drift or delay</p> <p>Practice will improve and be consistent</p> <p>Foster reviews will be holistic involving all contributors including children and will support stable placements</p>	<p>Discussion with social work service team managers to agree practice standards going forward for practice alerts and some shared goals</p> <p>Consistent use of all practice alerts by IROs and Fostering IRO</p> <p>Ensure use of dispute resolution when in disagreement with the plan to evidence IRO scrutiny and footprint</p> <p>Regular peer audit activity to improve consistency across the team</p> <p>Regular team audits to highlight themes and improve practice</p> <p>Monthly performance data</p> <p>Annual practice alert report</p>	<p>The practice alert protocol was introduced during the year to focus on ensuring all disputes raised focused on the impact on the child. Whilst less practice alerts were raised there were clearer themes identified as indicated earlier in this report.</p>
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## Future planning

Priority team objective	Impact statement (when you achieve this what will the impact be for children, young people and their families)	Measures of success	Actions needed to achieve priority objective
Provide children with a variety of methods to participate in their review	More children will attend their review meetings and take part in the actual review	Children and young people will feedback that they enjoyed their review and felt it was their meeting	For IROs to have the time to explore with each child how they would like to attend their review and what they would like to change to be able to attend their review
Ensure all children understand the role of the IRO and what the cared for review meeting is about	Children will know their IRO and have a relationship with them to ensure they take part in the review	When asked children will be able to name their IRO and what they do and what can be achieved from their cared for review	For IROs to visit all children and to keep in touch with them on a regular basis
Increase quality assurance activity to improve practice standards	Practice standards will improve and the impact of the IRO in relation to the experience they will bring to auditing activity will bring about shared goals and understanding of what good looks like. Networks and supportive relationships will be developed	Practice improvement will be clear from audit activity more audits will be good	IROs to take part in regular audit activity with team managers across the service
Support workforce development and practice	The experience of the IRO team will support practice improvement around specific themes	Practice will improve and timeliness will be evident in planning for reviews	IROs to provide support to masterclasses around the review process and other identified areas where they have valuable experience

<p>Improve the progress in children and young people's plans</p>	<p>Ensure recommendations from reviews are SMART and tracked by the IRO with clear escalation when not achieved as agreed</p>	<p>Delay and drift in plans will be reduced and outcomes for children and young people will improve</p>	<p>IROs to ensure midpoint reviews take place and recommendations are tracked effectively</p>
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Working for a brighter future together

## BRIEFING REPORT

### Corporate Parenting Committee

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<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	27 January 2022
<b>Report Title:</b>	Cheshire East Fostering Panel and Fostering Service Annual Reports
<b>Report of:</b>	Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services

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<b>Corporate Plan Priorities</b>	<b>Open</b>	An open and enabling organisation	
	<b>Fair</b>	A council which empowers and cares about people	X
	<b>Green</b>	A thriving and sustainable place	

#### 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The annual reports of the Fostering Panel and the Fostering Service for 2020-21 are presented to Committee to evidence the impact of our services and of our foster carers on outcomes for our children.

#### 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. These annual reports for 2020 to 2021 outline the delivery of our Fostering Service and impact of foster carers on outcomes for our children. They relate to pledge 3 of the Corporate Parenting Strategy: **'We will work to achieve permanence and keep children safe'**. The reports highlight the positive development and progress of work in Cheshire East between April 2020–March 2021. There are two reports:

- 2.1.1. **The Fostering Service Annual Report** – this report outlines the delivery of the Fostering Service in line with our statutory duty and national minimum standards during the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. This report

fulfils the obligations of Local Authority Agency Fostering Service National Minimum Standards.

- 2.1.2. This report sets out the current service structure and team responsibilities, with related performance information regarding the number of foster carers and their criteria, number of placements, work that has been undertaken during this period, and progress of the Mockingbird model and constellations. The report provides information on service management during the national pandemic and where services have been delivered differently during this time due to the associated restrictions that have been in place.
- 2.1.3. The report provides some feedback from service users to support the context and purpose of the service and positive impact that has been achieved for children, young people, families and foster carers.
- 2.1.4. The report also provides detail on service recruitment and marketing activity during the period as well as training delivery and how these areas have been impacted upon by the pandemic during this time.
- 2.2.1 **The Fostering Panel Annual Report** – this report outlines the operation of the Fostering Panel over the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, including changes as a result of the pandemic, frequency and panel membership. The report provides information around data and panel activity, include quality assurance and feedback, providing recommendations for development.
- 2.2.2 This report is written by the Independent Panel Chair and provides key areas of focus for 2021/22 on how to maintain and improve the operation of panel and therefore outcomes for children and the experience of panel attendees.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1. The Fostering Service is responsible for discharging Cheshire East's responsibilities and duties as a fostering agency, to recruit, support and develop foster carers and meet local responsibilities to ensure sufficiency with Cheshire East foster carers.
- 3.2. The Fostering Panel Annual Report provides a foreword from the Independent Chair and highlights positive outcomes and work in Cheshire East between April 2020– March 2021.
- 3.3. The performance information evidences progress with recruitment/registering carers, and work around timeliness and quality assurance of reports.

### **4. Implications**

#### **4.1. Legal**

- 4.1.1. This report fulfils the obligations in Fostering National Minimum Standards.
- 4.1.2. Legal advice will be sought, as appropriate, upon all relevant emerging issues.

## 4.2. Finance

4.2.1. There are no direct financial implications of these reports, during the time period.

## 4.3. Human Resources

4.3.1. Changes to working arrangements as a result of the pandemic are outlined in the reports.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Keith Martin <a href="mailto:Keith.Martin@Cheshireeast.gov.uk">Keith.Martin@Cheshireeast.gov.uk</a>  Cath Hogan <a href="mailto:Cath.Hogan@Cheshireeast.gov.uk">Cath.Hogan@Cheshireeast.gov.uk</a>
Appendices:	Fostering Service Annual Report 2020 – 2021 and Fostering Panel Annual Report 2020 – 2021
Background Papers:	None

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Cheshire East

# **TOGETHER** for Children and Young People

*Together we will make Cheshire East a great place to be young*

## Cheshire East Fostering Service Annual Report

April 2020 – March 2021



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## Cheshire East Fostering Service

Cheshire East is a busy, long-established local authority fostering service, which undertakes the full range of fostering work from mainstream recruitment and assessment to connected person assessment and training, support and supervision of all carers. The team is centralised and operates from an office base in Middlewich and covers the whole of Cheshire East, which is a large geographical area.

The fostering service in Cheshire East recruits, trains and supports mainstream and connected carers so that we can place our children in high quality foster placements close to their family, friends and school. It is a regulated service and is subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act 2000.

We provide high quality, stable placements for children with mainstream and connected foster carers, who can meet their needs, and who have high quality support, supervision and training. Our service is founded on good relationships with foster carers, with children and their social workers, and with everyone involved in the child's network, built on honesty, integrity, challenge and support, and we make strenuous efforts to achieve this. We make consistent efforts to listen and respond to our carers, ensuring that problems or worries are talked about openly and resolved quickly. We want our carers to have a voice and to be involved in the development of the service, and to this end we have significantly strengthened our consultations with foster carers and the ways in which we involve them in service development.



Where it is possible to do so, children will be supported within their own family with the provision of necessary services to ensure that children are safe and protected. If this is not possible, then they will be placed with extended family as connected carers in their own community. Where neither of these things is possible, early permanence with an adoptive or fostering family will be sought, and sometimes this can happen by the use of 'foster to adopt' placements. It is intended in 2021-22 to complete additional work with the regionalised adoption service of which Cheshire East is part about the use of concurrency placements.

The fostering service is managed by a Head of Service who also manages the Children with Disabilities service in Cheshire East. There is a Fostering Service Manager, and then four team managers with the social work teams under them. The business administrative support team is line managed through a separate line of accountability



but is part of the fostering service. There is a team of just over five full time equivalent fostering support workers who provide support to the service in respect of ensuring that checks are completed and who provide support groups for Sons and Daughters, for new foster carers to complete their Training and Development Standards and some general support groups such as 'Walk and Talk'. Fostering support workers are loosely attached to each of the teams.

### Gill, a birth child says:

"It makes me appreciate my own parents as I see how much they put into me, C, and L. They give us their all and will really do most things we ask/want.

My room is my privacy and the boys respect that and I theirs. I don't mind sharing our animals as they are kind to them. L is really sweet and very kind in nature. My friends also think the same."

## Teams in the Fostering Service

### We have five teams in the Fostering Service:

- Mainstream Recruitment and Assessment Team** – 2.5 full time equivalent social workers and a team manager – involvement in and oversight of all mainstream recruitment activity, responding to initial enquiries, arranging and undertaking initial visits and undertaking full fostering assessments and presenting these to the Fostering Panel. More recently, the team have been providing support and supervision to new carers following approval until the first review at 6 months. In this time period, the supervising social worker will ensure that the carers have a good induction and complete the required training to start them off in their fostering journey. The training officer post is also located in this team, and this worker provides Skills to Foster training for both mainstream and connected carers prior to their full approval, as well as ensuring that mandatory training is undertaken by carers, and developing a training programme for the year which is engaging and challenging for foster carers. Fostering support workers also provide support to this team by undertaking phone calls, initiating statutory checks on applicant carers and proving necessary equipment to carers.



- **Connected Carer Assessment and Support Team** – 8.5 full time equivalent supervising social workers and a team manager. This team go out with children’s social workers to see possible Regulation 24 carers when a child needs to be looked after by someone other than a birth parent and the role in this instance is to advise and support the child’s social worker in the application of fostering regulations and to assist in determining suitability. The team also undertake viability assessments and full fostering assessments of connected carers and provide support and supervision once children are placed and when full approval is given. Much of the work of this team is driven by court timescales and most assessments are filed within the care proceedings. Where the overall care plan is one of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO), this team will undertake the SGO assessment. Some SGO assessments are ‘private’ in the sense that the child is not a cared for child and there may only have been limited involvement from children’s services for the child. There is a small sub-team in this team, consisting of a supervising social worker, a half time education support worker and a family support worker who is also part time. This sub team have oversight of all Special Guardians in Cheshire East and provide support groups and training to this group, as well as individual support where this is needed. The children in this group are generally not open cases to social care, and the input is to support the whole family rather than being on an allocated child basis. Fostering support workers also provide support to this team by undertaking phone calls, initiating statutory checks on applicant carers and proving necessary equipment to carers.
- **Mockingbird Support and Supervision Team** – two supervising social workers and a team manager. One of the supervising social workers is the liaison worker required by the Mockingbird model and this worker supervises the hub home carer for each constellation and also some of the constellation carers. There are significant reporting and fidelity requirements associated with Mockingbird, and this team collates that information which is fed back to the Fostering Network. This team has also been working on the development of the second constellation which will launch in early 2022. The Mockingbird team also supervises and supports some mainstream carers who are not Mockingbird carers. This is a legacy position due to the fact that the staff were already established in the support and supervision team before moving across to the newly established Mockingbird team, and where possible we try not to disrupt carers support experience by frequent changes of supervising social worker unless that is absolutely necessary. The Team Manager of this team also takes a turn in being the Duty Placements Manager to support the placement of children in urgent need of care. Fostering support workers also provide support to this team by undertaking phone calls, initiating statutory checks on applicant carers and proving necessary equipment to carers.
- **Mainstream Support and Supervision Team** – 7.6 supervising social workers and a team manager. This team provides support and supervision to mainstream, short breaks carers and some connected carers. One supervising social worker in this team takes the lead in urgent placement finding for children and also in long term permanent placement finding for children, he works closely with the Placement Team in this regard, which has responsibility for the commissioning of external placements, both fostering and residential for children, he is assisted in this task by a part time fostering support worker. Another

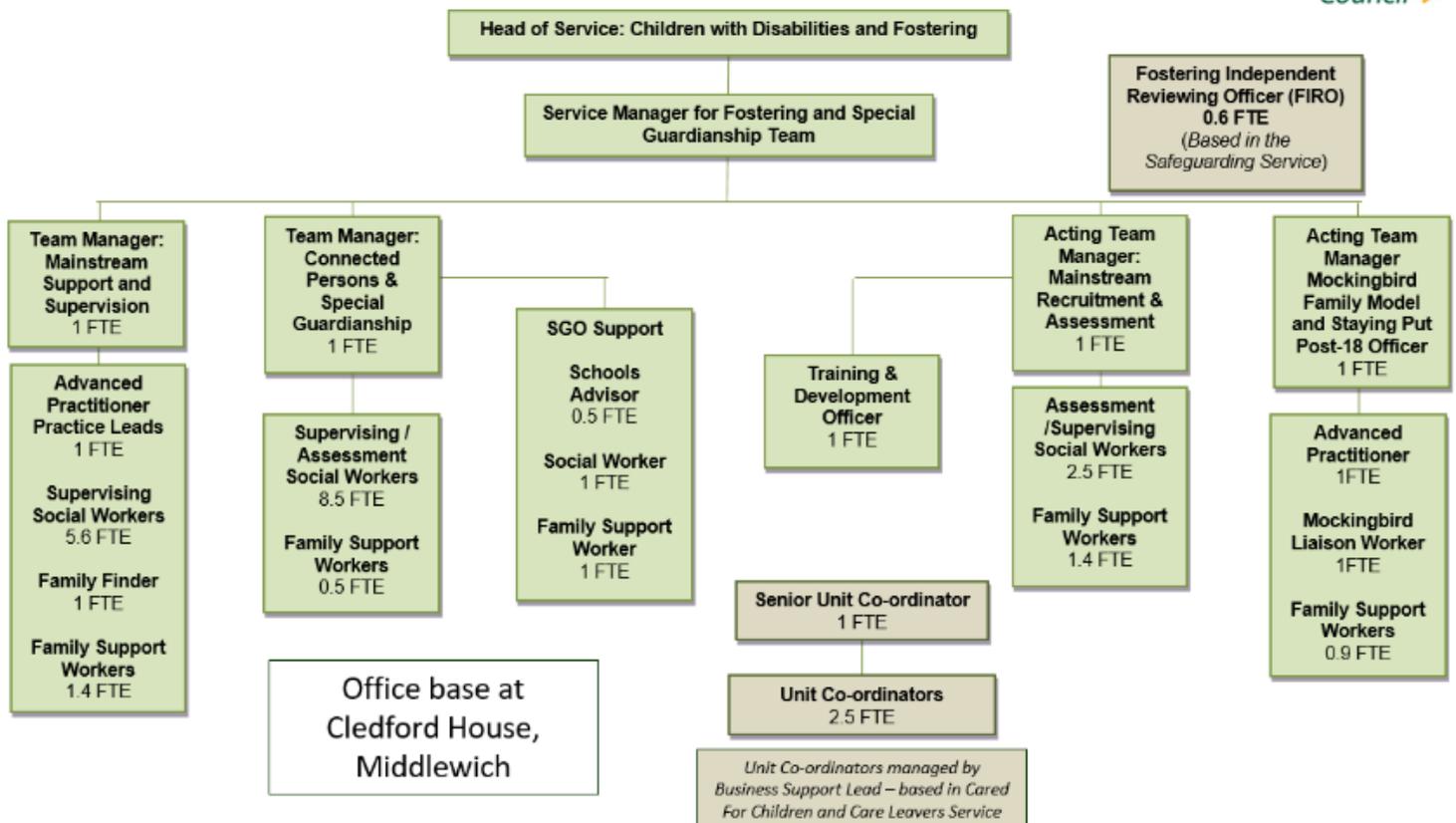


supervising social worker provides support and supervision to all of the short break carers and works closely with the children with disabilities service in order to achieve this, she also has some mainstream and connected carers on her caseload too. Fostering support workers also provide support to this team by undertaking phone calls, initiating statutory checks on applicant carers and proving necessary equipment to carers.

- Business Administrative Support Team** – This team has one full time senior unit co-ordinator and 4 unit co-ordinators, one of whom is full time. They provide administrative support to the service in the conduct of fostering checks and data collection. This team will also ensure that office telephones are answered, messages are appropriately directed, and will send out communications as required to foster carers. A key element of this role is the support to the fostering panel by taking minutes, liaison with the panel chair to ensure that minutes are correct and approved, ensuring that the reports are placed on the SharePoint for panel members to have access to prior to panel, and that the reports and minutes are provided to the Agency Decision Maker in a timely way for the final decision to be made. They then ensure that this is placed on Liquid Logic and that the carer goes on the Register of Foster Carers.

## Fostering Service Structure Chart

### Fostering and Special Guardianship Team



## Fostering Panel

Meets two and sometimes three times per month to consider panel business. The panel chair is independent and is not employed by Cheshire East. panel is assisted by an independent service advisor who again, is not employed by Cheshire East, and he undertakes the gatekeeping function for panel to ensure that all matters placed before panel meet the necessary minimum regulatory requirements. The service advisor has experience of chairing other local authority panels and independent fostering agencies (IFAs) and brings that experience and knowledge to the role. There is also a vice chair of panel who takes the chair when the usual panel chair is unavailable for some reason. The central list consists of a further eight panel members aside from the chair and vice chair. The service advisor does not sit as a voting panel member, his role is to provide advice to panel and to the service.

## Fostering Development Board

Oversight and governance of the fostering service is via a development board which consists of the Director of Children's Social Care, the Head of Service, Service Manager, Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer, Mockingbird Team Manager, Head of Service for Children's Commissioning and a linked staff member from communications. This group oversee and drive the development plan for the service and ensure that targets are set and adhered to.

## Summary of 2020 – 2021

The period April 2020 to March 2021 was characterised by Covid and the restrictions that individuals were placed under to contain the virus. The impact on every citizen was significant, but especially so for foster carers and children, particularly when the schools were closed. In no sense was this a 'normal' year.

Face to face contact for children with their families was stopped for a time and happened via video conferencing. There were some unanticipated consequences of this, one of which was that children generally seemed to find virtual contact less disruptive than when face to face, with fewer issues of young children being upset after it had happened, and also of parents being able to see the foster carer actively supporting their child to have contact with them, and thus improving the relationship between the carers and the parent as a result. There is no doubt that for many children, the absence of seeing a parent or loved one face to face was a significant and difficult event. We had thought that restrictions may result in placement disruptions, but this did not happen any more than it happens in more normal times. There were a number of foster carers who felt unable to take new children into their home over the last nine months of 2020, this being a time when no-one had been vaccinated and there was an understandable high level of concern about Covid, particularly for older carers and those with an underlying condition.



This eased somewhat in early 2021, when the vaccine was being rolled out and becoming more readily available.

Placement demand continued to be steady through the year, with particular pressures in placement finding for teenagers with some complex or challenging behaviours, and also for sibling groups.

## Mainstream Recruitment and Assessment

Prior to October 2020, Cheshire East had been in a collaborative recruitment arrangement with the other three Cheshire local authorities, and an independent review of the fostering service in January 2020 reached the conclusion that this was not working well for Cheshire East, and the decision was taken to leave Foster 4.

This was planned to have happened at the end of June 2020, however, the Covid pandemic resulted in this being delayed until the end of September 2020, and on 1st October 2020 Cheshire East commenced recruitment under our new 'Together for Fostering' branding which we had been developing for some months beforehand, together with foster carers. Enquiry numbers increased significantly, and we were generally undertaking around 12-14 mainstream fostering assessments at any one time. However, it soon became apparent that this would not be a normal year in terms of the expected ebbs and flows of fostering recruitment that usually happen. It seemed that the reality and practicalities of Covid were disrupting the usual rhythms of foster carer recruitment, and further, that most local authorities across the North West were experiencing this, as well as IFAs. This strongly indicated that there were other forces at work in terms of people's choices and decision making, and that force seemed to be Covid.

- Between 1st April 2020 and 31 March 2021, there were:
  - 181 initial enquiries
  - 63 initial visits
- In the year 2020-2021, we approved 15 new mainstream fostering households which provided 23 homes for children, plus another six homes if siblings were able to share a bedroom. This was an improvement on the previous year 2019-2020 when we were with Foster 4; during that year, eight new fostering households were approved.

At the time of writing, there is no obvious sign that the usual patterns of enquiries and recruitment will re-emerge imminently. However, we continue to make huge efforts to recruit carers and ensure that anyone who does make an enquiry has our comprehensive information booklet and has a conversation with a knowledgeable staff member, who can answer any questions and arrange for an initial visit to take place. We have also held



drop-in virtual sessions for those interested in fostering but who want to know more before they submit an enquiry.

### Design an Easter Egg Competition

In April 2020 we had a competition to design an Easter egg for children of foster carers, in collaboration with regional fostering services. One of our children won second prize and a voucher; this is their picture, the bunny egg.



## Mockingbird

The other notable event of this year was the development and launch of Mockingbird in Cheshire East. Cheshire East were successful in a bid to the Department for Education to work alongside the Foster Network to develop Mockingbird. We had appointed a Mockingbird team manager in March 2020, and we advertised among our foster carers for a hub home carer and the decision was made by a competitive interview process. Mockingbird as a model is entirely reliant on good relationships between the carers in the constellation and the hub home carer, and of course between the carers and the service. The relationships between the carers were all initiated and developed within a period when significant restrictions were in place, and it is a huge tribute to all those carers and staff that it got off to such a good start. The launch event was particularly moving – despite being virtual!



**A Cheshire East Foster Care from the Implementation Working Group said:**

“What an utterly marvellous event... a tribute to the tremendous job you have done and your leadership. (Hub Home Carer) was so impressive ...the team that she has already formed just looked so natural and really proves the power of foster carers and social workers working together as equals. She seems to have an innate ability to inspire and lead; I know the first hub home will be a great success.

I was so proud to be a fellow foster carer”

**Our Fostering Network Mockingbird Coach wrote:**

“(Satellite Carer) said the most touching thing I have ever heard during my 5 years of Mockingbird.....Mockingbird is heaven sent!!!”

**A Satellite Carer has told us:**

“As you know I am hugely grateful for all the support, guidance and friendship that being a part of the Mockingbird family has given me. As a newly approved foster carer with my first placement, I have always felt included, unjudged and have been able to tap into a huge wealth of knowledge and experience whenever I've needed. Never once have I ever felt alone as I know I have my Mockingbird family to fall back on.”

The first constellation initially consisted of eight families by March 2021; an experienced mainstream single female hub home carer, an experienced mainstream deputy hub home carer, four other mainstream carers, one of whom was newly approved and three friends and family carers. This is a good mix, and all of the carers feel that they have benefitted from the support that comes with Mockingbird.

**A Child's Social Worker from Cheshire East Care Planning Team said:**

“I think the Mockingbird model is a fantastic new resource and think it will be beneficial for both to my young person and his carers to be a part of it.”



## Mainstream Support and Supervision and Retention of Foster Carers

In this year, we lost seven mainstream fostering households through resignation, no foster carers were de-registered. One of these carers went to an IFA and others moved away from fostering due to life changes, or retirement.

As of 31 March 2021, Cheshire East had 99 approved mainstream fostering households.

We reviewed historical investigative processes under the Designated Officer processes (formerly Local Authority Designated Officer, LADO) for foster carers to ascertain which stage of the process resulted in the most delay in resolving the issue. It was clear that the delay occurred due to a lack of timeliness in progressing foster carers reviews after the investigation and then attending Fostering Panel. As a result of this review, we changed our approach to this. Our new process is that key dates and timescales are set at the beginning of the process and that carers are informed about these. This has helped to ensure that this investigative process is managed and concluded within the shortest possible timeframe. When an investigative process is necessary, this is very stressful for foster carers and some leave fostering as a result. We believe that our improved approach has helped us to retain carers who may otherwise have left.

We believe that we offer high quality support to carers, and carers are encouraged to contact a manager if they have an issue. Managers have an 'open-door' policy and will always talk to carers who are unhappy about something.

A review of foster carer allowances and fees took place, there having been no change in these for several years. In Cheshire East, foster carers get a professional fee for each child, as well as allowances, most fostering services pay one fee only. Going forward, the pay award for foster carers will mirror the pay award given to council staff negotiated through the National Joint Council. Foster carers were given a pay increase that was backdated to April 2020 which took account of the years in which there had been no increase at all. This means that Cheshire East payments to foster carers are among the highest local authority payments in the North West. Our allowances are paid at rates that are above the national minimum recommendation.

We do our utmost not to disrupt the relationship between the foster carer and their supervising social workers, as we know that this can make carers feel that they need to 'start again' with a new worker, we believe that the best support for foster carers is to have a supervising social worker that they trust and feel they can rely on. There are times when changes need to happen however, and we try to make this as easy as possible. Over the year 2020-21, we had a number of staff in the support and supervision team who were on maternity leave and so we had several interim workers to cover their roles.



**A birth child and a placed child said:**

“I see N as my sister”  
 N’s comments: “I don’t feel like it’s my foster home it’s just my home - I want everything to stay normal”

Long term family finding also happens in this team, as well as the immediate finding of homes for children who need to come into care at short notice. Sometimes, long term families are sought from IFA carers, and staff in this team will read the Form F of potential matches and will then take things forward to secure permanent homes for these children.



*Some very wet Walking and Talking Foster Carers*

**Another child says...**

**What do you like about living with your foster carer(s)?**

“They are really nice. I like our holidays and spending lots of time together. We have trips to the beach and go to watch Leeds Utd play – that’s fun! I’m allowed to go out and play with my friends and my friends are allowed to come to our house.”

**What activities do you enjoy doing the most with your foster carer(s)?**

“Watching Leeds Utd play and going to Elland Rd stadium. Watching movies and having a takeaway. We go on lots of walks with the dog. Going to Wales to see C, seeing the siblings playing and popping in on M and J for a chat and a coke”

**Is there anything you don’t like about your foster carers?**

“Not really. They’re fair”



## Connected Carer Assessment and Support and Special Guardianship Team

The connected team in Cheshire East is busy team with a steady stream of viability assessments and Regulation 24 work also. We will place a child with their extended family where it is safe to do so, and children usually thrive in these placements. Because we know that connected carers often need to deal with difficult family dynamics around issues such as contact, birthdays and festivals, we have been able this year to develop and provide a Skills to Foster training course for connected carers that not only puts them in touch with each other as connected carers, but also helps them to think about and prepare for the difficulties and dilemmas involved in caring for a child from your wider family network.

In 2020-21, we did 242 Viability Assessments, of which 81 resulted in a full Fostering Assessment. Of these 81 assessments, 31 resulted in the permanent placement of children. The remaining 50 ended in one of the following options:

- Applicants withdrew
- Applicants were assessed as a contingency and the children were never placed.
- Applicants were considered not suitable to be recommended as alternative carers.

When a child who lives with a connected carer is placed on a full care order at the end of care proceedings, the placement is the permanent home for the child until they are 18 or no longer need to be cared for. During the court process, the needs of the child are considered against the capacity of the carer, and this is a matching process, so there is no plan that the child will ever move. Connected carers receive the same payments as mainstream foster carers and the same opportunities for training and development. Generally speaking, the foster carer will continue to be supervised and supported by the same person who did their assessment, thus helping to build that critical relationship of trust.

Within the connected team, there is a small sub-team which works with families where an SGO has been granted. The children may sometimes be open to a social worker, but the support provided by this team is to the family unit, rather than to the child. This team arranges support groups and meetings, special guardians also have access to the training that foster carers have, and if there are particular issues that need to be addressed but are not significant enough to warrant that the child has a social worker, then this small team can provide some bespoke support.



## Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer

We are fortunate during this year to have recruited a knowledgeable Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) with an excellent understanding of fostering to undertake foster carer reviews. She inherited a position whereby some reviews were out of timescale, but she has worked hard to rectify this position since then. Foster carer reviews have generally been held virtually, with some being face to face where the issues were difficult or complex or carers were upset about something. It is hoped that we can get back to more reviews being face-to-face over 2021-22.

- 78% (138) of foster carer reviews were on time, and 21.6% (38) were out of timescale. Reasons for being out of timescale usually related to there having been a Designated Officer investigation.

During reviews, if there are concerns, consistent effort is made to ensure that there is a plan developed that will support the carer through the necessary development and training to resolve the issues. Secure Base interview techniques have been used successfully in this context with some carers.

### J, a child, told the Reviewing Officer:

“Grandpa's doing an amazing job, we are all really proud of him, stepping up to take care of us when Gran died”

## Successes in 2020 – 2021

### Despite the difficulties posed by Covid, we had lots of successes in 2020-21:

- On 1 October 2020 we launched our own fostering brand ‘Together for Fostering’ which we had developed over many months with foster carers.
- In October 2020 we launched our first Mockingbird constellation with funding from the DfE and in partnership with The Fostering Network. The launch was a virtual event which involved all the Mockingbird carers who each spoke about why they had become part of it and what their hopes were for Mockingbird in Cheshire East.
- We had identified that there was an issue about the involvement of foster carers in the service, and so we ensured that all major fostering activity was undertaken in collaboration with foster carers, such as the branding and marketing, Mockingbird, SharePoint and Portal development and also in relation to the development of policies and procedures.
- We have recruited more mainstream foster carers this year – 15 – this is more than we have recruited for a number of years, and this was a significant improvement on the previous year with Foster 4, where we recruited eight mainstream fostering households.
- We recruited to our training and development post and have been able to develop a comprehensive training offer for foster carers and also to provide Skills to Foster for



mainstream and a separate Skills to Foster offer for connected applicants to take account of and reflect the different nature of fostering for them and some of the family tensions that they may experience as a result.

- We have used some of the Mockingbird principles to develop a buddying/mentoring scheme using existing carers to support newly approved carers for carers who are not in Mockingbird.
- During the Covid lockdown period, when schools were closed, we paid all carers an additional £25 per week per child to help carers with the additional costs of having children at home all the time.
- We started a regular newsletter which goes out about every two months and contains a variety of information about the service, about numbers of cared for children, activity in the fostering service and other interesting reading; these have been well received and foster carers have also contributed items for the newsletter.
- In May 2020 the safeguarding service appointed a new fostering independent reviewing officer who had an established track record of working within fostering services.
- In collaboration with foster carers, we developed a SharePoint for all foster carers, this contains policy and procedure information, newsletters and other articles with interesting reading on a variety of subjects, all new foster carers get a log in as part of their induction process.
- In collaboration with foster carers, we developed a Portal for foster carers, this enables them to submit a (currently limited) number of forms into the fostering service and the form goes straight into Liquid Logic, our case management system. The variety of forms will be increased over the coming months following a reconfiguration of the fostering part of Liquid Logic.
- We increased the fee payments for all foster carers in April 2020.
- We started the process of recruiting to a new post of Assessment and Recruitment Team Manager. This ensured that this area would be given particular focus and drive.
- We found homes for three children who had Covid because our carers were willing to take them into their homes.
- During Covid lockdowns, we increased our frequency of contact with foster carers to ensure that they and everyone in their household were ok.
- We supported carers during lockdowns by doing shopping and other essential things for them when they were unable to do this for themselves due to the need of someone in the household to shield.
- We improved our response to complaints made by foster carers to ensure that discussions always took place with carers who had an issue and that issues were resolved as soon as possible.
- We undertook a review of Designated Officer investigations over the previous few years due to concerns from carers that these were taking too long to resolve. The review found that the delay in resolution was arising during the internal fostering processes, and not due to delay in the formal investigative process being concluded. As a result, we developed a new process whereby all necessary steps and meetings (foster carer review and fostering panel) were booked in at the start of the process, and foster carers were informed about this and had some confidence in the timescales for resolving the issues. This has resulted in the overall duration of



these processes being significantly reduced, which is better for foster carers, and better for the service.

- The Fostering Development Board became the key governance body for the fostering service, recognising that the improvement of the fostering service, and mainstream recruitment in particular, are central to the overall health of children’s services. The Fostering Development Board is the primary means by which plans are developed, tracked and implemented and reviewed, and will ensure the progression and delivery of the plans for 2021-2022.

## Challenges of 2020-2021

- Covid presented a number of challenges not least of which initially was a lack of available technology to undertake video calling to foster carers and other staff members, however this was rectified fairly quickly to help carers use technology to interact and undertake meetings and virtual visits.
- It took staff and carers some time to adjust to the new ways of working that were necessitated by Covid such as risk assessments and virtual visits.
- Ensuring that the Fostering Panel was able to continue to function effectively during lockdown, initially this was facilitated by telephone conference calling and then later via Teams.
- Some newly approved foster carers did not feel able to take a child into their home after approval and later resigned without ever having cared for a child.
- Some foster carers did not feel able to take new children into their homes during the tightest lockdown periods, so placement options were reduced during those times.
- Some foster carers were hesitant about resuming in person visiting by supervising social workers
- Some new enquirers and applicants found it hard to fully commit to fostering during the uncertainty that Covid created.

## Plans for 2021-22

### Service Development Plans 2021-2022

What	By Whom	When
Our training opportunities for foster carers will develop into a blended approach of face to face and webinars or online training – Covid permitting!	Training SSW	February 2022
We will develop Reflective Groups for foster carers, facilitated by staff and carers themselves	Training SSW, Supervising Social Workers	Launch August 2021, then recruit carers for a second group to launch in year



We will continue to promote placement stability and to match children into long-term placements where that is the right thing to do	All	Ongoing
We will continue to support special guardians and their children, and we note that there seems to be a more general acceptance and commitment nationally to the importance of this work	SGO Team	Ongoing
We will launch our second Mockingbird constellation	Mockingbird Lead Team Manager	January 2022
We will explore the use of concurrency placements with Adoption Counts, our regionalised adoption service	Service Manager	January 2022
We will continue to use Foster to Adopt where possible in order to promote early permanence for children	All	Ongoing
Funding has been secured for a programme of optimization of the fostering areas of Liquid Logic, our case management system which will ensure that the processes and workflows for fostering are more closely synchronised with the way in which cases evolve, particularly for connected carers. This will mean in turn that we have accurate reporting of performance and timeliness for the fostering service and will be better positioned to understand and develop our own performance	All, in consultation with Project Manager for Optimization and ICS team	Launch December 2021 and then review and refine
We will continually review our performance in key areas and make changes where they are needed in order to ensure that the service is self-critical and responsive	All	Ongoing

### Diversity Plans 2021-2022

What	By Whom	When
Increase the diversity of the fostering panel central list to ensure that we have a wide variety of ages and cultural backgrounds and in particular, representation of people with an experience of having been cared for	Service Manager and Panel Chair	January 2022
We will ensure that our recruitment materials, advertising and methods of recruitment are accessible to all and are reflective of the diverse population that live in Cheshire East and will attract a wide range of people to become foster carers for Cheshire East.	Comms Lead, Service Manager and Recruitment TM	Ongoing



We will undertake targeted recruitment to find warm and welcoming homes for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.	Comms Lead, Service Manager and Recruitment TM	January 2022
We will continue to ensure that all foster carers receive training in relation to diversity which encompasses ethnicity, social class, gender identity, sexuality and disability	Training SSW and Supervising Social Workers	Ongoing

### Consultation and Involvement Plans 2021-2022

What	By Whom	When
We will continue to ensure that foster carers are routinely involved in the development of the service	Head of Service, Service Manager, Team Managers, Training SSW, Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer	Ongoing
We will begin to work with carers to develop a Foster Carer Association with key foster carer representatives with whom the service can consult.	Head of Service, Service Manager, Team Managers	January 2022
We will develop a year-long plan of foster carer forums which will be undertaken either virtually or in person (depending on Covid) to ensure that carers have the chance to meet and mix with each other and talk things through with service representatives	Head of Service, Service Manager, Team Managers	January 2022
We will continue to ensure that complaints are dealt with promptly and thoroughly and respond to all concerns raised	Head of Service, Service Manager, Team Managers	Ongoing

### Mainstream Fostering Household Recruitment Plans 2021-2022

What	By Whom	When
Cheshire East intends to become a Fostering Friendly Employer	Head of Service	March 2022
We will get out and about to shows and other events in the Cheshire East area, such as The Cheshire Show and Geronimo and become involved in local networking events to	Head of Service, Service Manager, Team Managers,	January 2022



promote the Cheshire East fostering service and enhance our foster carer recruitment	Supervising Social Workers, Fostering Support Workers, Comms Lead.	
We will undertake more community-based advertising and recruitment activities, developing links with local groups and organisations	Comms Lead, Assessment and Recruitment TM, Supervising Social Workers and Fostering Support Workers	April 2021
We will develop and share a recruitment strategy 2021 - 2023, we want to be ambitious and regularly active to meet our sufficiency demands and attract new foster carers	Comms Lead, Service Manager and Assessment and Recruitment TM	April 2021
We will start targeted recruitment to find homes for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children	Comms Lead, Service Manager, Assessment and Recruitment TM	January 2022
We will undertake targeted recruitment to find homes for young people who are in residential settings who want to live in a family, and to find homes for young people who may otherwise go into a residential setting	Comms Lead, Service Manager, Assessment and Recruitment TM	January 2022
We will develop a Parent and Child Fostering Scheme to work with adult parents, and also with young people under 18 who are to become parents	Service Manager, Assessment and Recruitment TM	March 2022



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# **Fostering Panel Annual Report**

## **1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021**



**Foreword**



*As Independent Chair I am pleased to present the Annual Report of Cheshire East Council's Fostering Panel. The report contains an overview of the work of the Fostering Panel across the last twelve months and intends to give the reader both an understanding of how Panel has managed the business presented to it and the changes within the wider Council that have impacted on it.*

*This has been an unusual year for Panel, the whole year being set within the Covid pandemic and the impact this has had on the delivery of services. This has meant that Panels have been held two and sometimes three times per month virtually rather than in the local authority's offices and has been at times challenging but it is noteworthy that most foster carers attended Panel and gave positive feedback about this way of meeting. The number of Panels held across the year has also increased to manage the increased volume of business generated across the service. The commitment and flexibility of all staff including the Panel administrators and Panel members has ensured Panel has continued unabated.*

*Panel continues to receive good administrative support and this has been critical to maintain Panel's smooth running throughout the Pandemic and the timeliness of recommendations to the Service following meetings.*

*As a Panel we recognise that applicants may feel apprehensive when attending and try and keep our meetings as small as possible. It is important to recognise though that the Panel's priority is to ensure that those children and young people who require a foster placement are provided with the highest quality of service and this aim is central to our work at all times.*

*It is rewarding to see when Panel has a positive influence on practice. The service has evidenced a willingness to be receptive to advice and constructive challenge and, with regular support from the Service Manager, advice is acknowledged and accepted by the service.*

*Finally I would like to take this opportunity thank all Panel members and those who work for the Panel for their support this year. Most importantly I would like to thank the foster carers and children and young people who have shared their stories with us, either in person or within the papers that informed our work .*

**Audrey Williamson**  
**Chair**

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## Introduction

Although there is no statutory or regulatory requirement for an annual report of the fostering panel to be produced, this report is intended to contribute to the *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards – Standard 14*:

- Panel/s provide quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel.

It will also follow good practice guidelines which suggest that the annual report should have a wider remit, commenting on the work of fostering panel, its constitution, and arrangements with the service.

## Constitution of Cheshire East Fostering Panel

Cheshire East Council is a local authority fostering service. Its fostering panel has several regulatory functions which are listed under the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 - regulation 25*. They are to:

- make recommendations about the approval of foster carers.
- recommend any terms of approval.
- consider the first review of carers and any other review if requested by the fostering service provider, and to recommend the continuing approval of carers.
- advise, where appropriate, on the procedure for reviews of carers and periodically to monitor their effectiveness.
- oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider.
- give advice and make recommendations on other matters or cases referred to it by the fostering service provider.

In addition to the functions listed in the Fostering Regulations, the Cheshire East Council fostering panel considers and makes recommendations concerning proposed permanent matches of children with foster carers for all children.

The relevant Legislation, Guidance and Standards for the fostering panel are:

- The Children Act 1989
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services
- Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.
- Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2011.
- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption and Care Planning (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2014

- Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015
- Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services, 2013
- The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020; The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2020, as amended by The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (up to 30.09.21).

The composition of fostering panels, terms of reference and functions are set out in the [Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations 2011](#).

All fostering service providers are legally required to have a fostering panel. The regulations ensure that fostering panels have an independent role separate from the fostering service provider.

## **Meetings and Venue**

The Cheshire East Council fostering panel usually meets at Cledford House, which has adequate meeting rooms and waiting facilities. The proximity of the fostering team and some children's social work services proves helpful to panel. The usual frequency of panel meetings has increased in 2020-21 from an average of 1.5 per month to 3 per month, held on Mondays and Fridays. This increase better reflects service demand.

During the Coronavirus pandemic however, lockdowns and restrictions on face-to-face meetings have meant that all panels in the last year have been held virtually, using Microsoft Teams.

## **Number of Fostering Panels**

There were 28 fostering panels during 2020-21. The vast majority were chaired by the Independent Chair, but the Vice-Chair covered when the Chair was absent.

## **Standing Members of Panel**

### ***Panel Chair***

The Fostering Panel chair is Audrey Williamson.

### ***Panel Vice Chair***

The Fostering Panel Vice Chair is Pauline Barber.

**Central List Members**

<b>Central List Member</b>	<b>Representation</b>
Audrey Williamson	Independent Panel Chair
Pauline Barber	Independent Vice Chair
Dr Pari Sreekumar	Medical Adviser
Gill Merry	Independent
Cllr Carol Bulman	Elected Member
Tina Powell	Independent
Lindsay Henretty	Independent
Tim Hancock	Independent/ Foster Carer/Social Worker
Sophie Steventon	CE Therapeutic Social Worker
Dianne Grant	Independent/ Social Worker
Gary Pickles	Service Adviser

**Panel Administrator**

The Fostering Administrators are Marion Mordecai and Ella Foley.

**Panel Adviser**

Gary Pickles is the Independent Service Adviser.

The quorum for panel business is a minimum of five central list members, to include:

- The Chair or Vice Chair;
- A social worker with at least three years relevant post-qualifying experience;
- Three other members, of which, in the absence of the independent Chair, at least one must be independent of the fostering service.

The previous practice of using fostering team social workers to ensure quoracy has been challenged on grounds of conflict and as a result, they were withdrawn from the central list. Recruitment is ongoing to strengthen the central list.

**Observers to Panel**

The Fostering Panel welcomes observers as a part of their learning and development. During this period there have been several observers including social workers and new panel members.

**Fostering Panel Development**

Fostering panel development is an ongoing process. To contribute to this, members of the central list each have an annual appraisal and two development sessions were organised and held in May

and December 2020. On the agenda were the Coronavirus pandemic, learning from Serious Case Reviews, and an exploration as to how the panel might improve its practice.

## Ofsted

Cheshire East Council inclusive of its fostering service was judged as 'Requires Improvement' in 2019. Fostering panel noted that the report said that:

*"Sufficiency of in-house foster carers is a known service challenge. The number of approved fostering households has reduced and recent attempts to improve recruitment has not had the impact the local authority had hoped for. The quality of foster carer assessment is good. The IRO for fostering is providing an effective level of challenge to ensure that carers continue to meet the fostering standards. Foster carers reported that they have access to a range of good training, which supports them in caring for the children in their care. A significant group of foster carers have raised a series of concerns over a period of time and during the inspection about the support they receive from the local authority. Inspectors found that foster carers were not always well supported and that, in some cases, working relationships were at risk of breaking down. Senior leaders are aware of the issues, and a much-needed independent review of the fostering service planned prior to the inspection is underway".*

As a result, panel has continued its focus on the business required but with an eye on these areas.

## Panel Activity

The following items were presented to fostering panel for consideration:

- **Connected Approvals** – 37 Family and Friends (Connected People) Households were presented to panel for approval. This is an increasing area of business and reflects the trend to maintain a child's place within their family. Of these applications, 25 were presented with the child in placement – regulation 24 applications, and eight were presented as prospective placements.
- **Mainstream Approvals** – 15 Mainstream Fostering Households have been presented and approved, with five of these being transfers from Independent Providers. This is an increase in mainstream approvals of 11 in the previous year and is potentially as a result of Cheshire East's withdrawal from Foster4 to go it alone.
  - This recruitment enabled the provision of 23 homes for children, plus another six homes if siblings were able to share a bedroom. Within these figures, five Cheshire East children were living with foster carers at the point of transfer, with a further six additional homes being available for children with these carers.
  - The maximum statutory timeframe for completion of mainstream fostering assessments is eight months; all assessments considered by panel were completed within these timescales. Cheshire East has its own 16 weeks/4-month target for the completion of such assessments. Achievement of this has been seen to be more difficult, and mitigating

factors that have inhibited this have included applicants having building work completed to better enable them to foster, experiencing family bereavements and others who decided to go on holiday during the assessment period.

- **Consideration of Approval** – one application was received by panel with a service request to consider de-registration. Panel concurred with the service.
- **Resignations** – 31 resignations have been noted at panel, 16 of which were mainstream and 15 were connected carers. The reasons for resignations include changes in personal circumstances or most frequently, the granting of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).
- **Requests for Extensions** - 13 requests for Extension to Temporary Approval have been made. This figure suggests that most family and friends applications that the service is involved in are completed without the need for an extension.
- **First Reviews** – 11 First Reviews have been presented to panel. All these were recommended for approval by panel.
- **Other Reviews:**
  - Seven reviews following allegations/serious issues of concern were heard. All were recommended as suitable to be foster carers.
  - Seven reviews requested a change of registration were heard.
  - One review notifying of a change of circumstance was heard.
  - Two reviews were heard as an Early Review at the request of Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

### **Agency Decision Maker**

The ADM has provided welcome challenge to panel recommendations, providing an opportunity for panel to reflect and learn from the decisions made. The ADM decision, although making comment, did not depart from panel's recommendation this year.

### **Quality of Applications to Panel**

There is general agreement between panel members that they have observed a steady improvement over the last year in the quality of reports that have been presented to panel. It has been noted that documentation presented to panel in 2020-21 has been quality assured, and recommendations have been authorised by the relevant team manager. Panel papers are more cohesive, analytical and, in the main, follow an agreed format.

Panel's judgement of the quality of an assessment tends to be indistinguishable from its judgement of the quality of the report. It will deem a report to be of sufficient quality when it is seen to provide comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the applicant/s and makes clear and persuasive the reasons for the recommendation or matching considerations, thus reflecting

a sound assessment. It is welcome practice for assessing social workers to identify the applicant's vulnerabilities as well as their strengths.

When reading the assessment reports, panel members routinely check that all required basic components of an assessment have been completed, for example:

- that checks, medicals and references have been completed.
- the applicant's history, relevant experience, motivation and understanding of the fostering task explored.
- that applicants have participated in the Skills to Foster training (where appropriate) and have expressed a commitment to further training and development.
- that any children or relevant ex-partners have been consulted.
- that any health and safety issues have been addressed.

When introducing each item, the Chair seeks confirmation from the panel members that the reports provide enough information on which to base the discussion, on the understanding that any specific gaps could be filled by the presenting social workers or foster carers. The opportunity to comment on matters of practice, including timeliness, is available when issues for discussion are identified.

### **Panel Advice and Impact**

The fostering panel continues to comment on the quality of applications made but it also makes comment and offers advice on practice to the service. This is done with the intention of helping to improve fostering practice and care planning for children, which happens by way of a written tracker to record any panel issues or queries, and the service then responds to those queries in writing. On occasion there are also discussions between the service and the service advisor on practice matters. Any issues which are of concern and are not responded to, or it is believed escalation is required, are escalated further up the hierarchy. This adds as an effective safeguard for both the service and panel and is not intended to undermine anyone in the service.

### **Virtual Panels and Covid-19**

During the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions on face-to-face meetings have meant that all panels in the last year have been held virtually, using Microsoft Teams. Part 8 of The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) 2020 introduced transitional arrangements for dealing with fostering assessments that started between 24 April 2020 until 25 September 2020. The guidance stated that the service provider could choose whether to refer a case to the fostering panel for a recommendation on suitability and allowed panels to go ahead with a reduced quoracy of three members including the Chair, an appropriately qualified and experienced social worker, and one other independent member. The guidance was clear that these "flexibilities" should only be used where necessary. From 25 September onwards,

the flexibilities came to an end. Cheshire East Children's Services continued to refer all assessments to the fostering panel during this period and decided to maintain the normal quoracy of at least five members per panel.

The pandemic restrictions have led to significant changes in the way that fostering panels are now delivered in Cheshire East and in the rest of England and Wales. Video conferencing has needed technological solutions, attention to data protection requirements, and big changes in the way panel takes place, with all members participating in virtual panels from their home environments. Some of the challenges have been:

- High degree of concentration necessary to work via computer screens, necessitating shorter agendas, regular breaks and increased time allowed per item in recognition of technical issues.
- Availability of suitable equipment and internet connections.
- Some panel members have not met each other in person.
- Increased pre-panel preparation, requiring preparation of strengths, vulnerabilities, and potential questions in advance to make use of the constraints of having free flowing conversation before items are heard.
- Foster carers being notified of the outcome of panel some hours after the application was heard and also via telephone as oppose to face-to-face.

However, there have been distinct advantages in working remotely which has seen:

- An increase in attendance and participation from all parties but particularly children's social workers.
- A reduction in time and cost of travel, maximising the time that can be spent on considering items.
- The undoubted preference by some participants, particularly foster carers, of meeting virtually, bringing with it the reduction in pressure and anxiety sometimes brought about by attendance at a face-to-face meeting.

What has become clear is Cheshire East's planning and preparation in running a Teams conference for a number of hours, with people coming and going to attend the panel. Much of the credit for this must go to the administrative team which has supported the panel throughout.

### **Voice of the Child**

Panel is clear that the voices of children and young people who are looked after should be heard at panel to ensure the recommendations it makes are well informed. This remains a significant aspect of panel's work and we always question how we can continue to ensure that the child

remains central to our work. Further, where a child's views are not referenced, the presenting social worker will always be questioned as to why it is absent.

### **Experience of Attendees at Panel**

It is pleasing to note that almost all attendees at panel give positive feedback, making comment about being made to feel comfortable and relaxed. A considerable number of feedback forms were sampled, and all spoke positively about that experience at panel. This is valuable feedback for panel members.

### **Key areas for 2021-22**

- Increase the diversity of fostering panel membership.
- Improve information sharing between the fostering service and fostering panel and ensure all workers understand panel and that there is open communication through to other parts of the service. Operating virtually can be isolating if this is not worked upon.
- Ensure that there is a clear training programme in place for all panel members and that they continue to be offered annual appraisals.
- That further work is undertaken to ensure the panel advice tracker is completed and the outcomes returned to panel.
- During 2020-21, a panel information leaflet was not available to give to prospective foster carers who are undergoing the assessment process. This needs to be developed and shared with panel attendees.
- That the panel and the service continue to seek the voice of children to contribute to panel items.

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## **Corporate Parenting Committee**

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<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	27 January 2022
<b>Report Title:</b>	Changes to time of the Corporate Parenting Committee and Review of the Terms of Reference
<b>Report of:</b>	Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services
<b>Ward(s) Affected:</b>	Not applicable

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<b>Corporate Plan Priorities</b>	<b>Open</b>	An open and enabling organisation	x
	<b>Fair</b>	A council which empowers and cares about people	x
	<b>Green</b>	A thriving and sustainable place	

### **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1. This report proposes that from the new Committee year, so for meetings held from April 2022 onwards, the Corporate Parenting Committee is held within usual business hours, so from 10am or 2pm in line with other Committees. rather than 4pm – 6pm as it meets currently. The Committee is also requested to review its terms of reference as this is required on an annual basis.

### **2. Executive Summary**

- 2.1. This report proposes that from the new Committee year, so for meetings held from April 2022 onwards, the Corporate Parenting Committee is held within usual business hours, so from 10am or 2pm in line with other Committees, rather than 4pm – 6pm as it meets currently. The Committee is also requested to review its terms of reference as this is required on an annual basis.

### **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1. The Committee is asked to:
- 3.2. Approve that the Corporate Parenting Committee is held within usual business hours from April 2022 onwards.
- 3.3. Review and endorse the terms of reference.

### **4. Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1. The Corporate Parenting Committee is currently held from 4pm. This arrangement was put in place to allow children and young people to attend the Committee. Children and young people have since chosen to inform the Committee through meeting as a Shadow Committee, therefore meetings no longer need to be held outside of usual business hours and can be moved back to be in line with other committees.
- 4.2. The terms of reference (Appendix 1) is required to be reviewed annually by the Committee.

### **5. Other Options Considered**

- 5.1. The meeting could continue to be held at 4pm, however, as there is now no rationale for holding the Committee outside usual business hours, it is recommended that the Committee be moved to be in line with the other committees.

### **6. Implications**

#### **6.1. Legal**

- 6.1.1. There are no specific legal implications.

#### **6.2. Finance**

- 6.2.1. There are no financial implications.

#### **6.3. Policy**

- 6.3.1. There are no policy implications.

#### **6.4. Equality**

- 6.4.1. There are no equality implications.

#### **6.5. Human Resources**

- 6.5.1. There are no human resource implications.

#### **6.6. Risk Management**

- 6.6.1. There are no risks to consider as a result of this proposal.

**6.7. Rural Communities**

6.7.1. There are no implications for rural communities.

**6.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children**

6.8.1. There are no implications for children and young people. Should children and young people wish to return to attending the Committee we could move the meetings back to a later time.

**6.9. Public Health**

6.9.1. There are no public health implications.

**6.10. Climate Change**

6.10.1. There are no climate change implications.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Lauren Conway, Business Manager <a href="mailto:Lauren.conway@cheshireeast.gov.uk">Lauren.conway@cheshireeast.gov.uk</a>
Appendices:	Terms of Reference
Background Papers:	None

## **Appendix 1: Terms of Reference**

### **Corporate Parenting Committee**

#### **Membership: 12 Councillors**

Additionally the Committee is informed by representative young people from My Voice (Cheshire East's Children in Care Council) to advise the Committee.

The Chair is the Lead Member for Children and Families.

#### ***Functions***

1. The purpose of the Corporate Parenting Committee in its role as an advisory committee to the Children and Families Committee is to ensure that the Council effectively discharges its role as Corporate Parent for all children and young people in care and care leavers from 0- 25 years of age and holds partners to account for the discharge of their responsibilities.
2. The Committee's responsibilities include:
  - 2.1 acting as advocate for cared for children and care leavers, ensuring that their needs are addressed through key plans, policies and strategies throughout the Council and its commissioned services;
  - 2.2 ensuring key strategic plans relating to children in care and care leavers are in place and are delivered including the Corporate Parenting Strategy, Sufficiency Statement and Children and Young People's Plan;
  - 2.3 overseeing the implementation of Cheshire East's Corporate Parenting Strategy and action plan and monitoring the quality and effectiveness of services to ensure that they fulfil the Council's responsibilities;
  - 2.4 monitoring the quality of care delivered by Cheshire East's residential children's homes through visits and reports, including summary reports of Ofsted inspections;
  - 2.5 reviewing the performance of the Council in relation to outcomes for children and young people in care via the scrutiny of both quarterly performance reports and annual reports including the Health of Cared for Children and Care Leavers, the Virtual School, Fostering and the Independent Reviewing Service;
  - 2.6 establishing an environment whereby Councillors and young people work together to address the needs and aspirations of Cheshire East's children and young people in care and empower children and young people to participate in decision making with adults;

- 2.7 overseeing with the Children and Families Committee the implementation of best practice principles in all aspects of service delivery, with the aim of producing positive outcomes for children and young people in care;
- 2.8 supporting the work of foster carers and adopters in making a difference to the care and support they provide;
- 2.9 making sure that staff and partners commit to follow the pledges to cared for children and young people and care leavers set out in the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

### **Governance**

3. The Committee will:
  - 3.1 meet bi-monthly;
  - 3.2 report to the Children and Families Committee on at least an annual basis; and
  - 3.3 review its terms of reference annually.
4. The Committee will be serviced by Democratic Services.
5. Minutes and agendas will be distributed and published no later than 5 clear working days prior to the meeting.

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