



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 2021 – March 2022



Contents

Section	Page
1. Cheshire East Fostering Service	2
2. Teams in the Fostering Service	3
2.1 Mainstream Recruitment and Assessment	3
2.2 Connected Carers Assessment and Support and Special Guardianship and SGO Support	4
2.3 Mainstream Support and Supervision	4
2.4 Business Administrative Support Team	5
3. Fostering Panel	5
4. Fostering Development Board	
5. Summary of 2021-22	6
5.1 Mainstream Recruitment and Assessment	7
5.2 Mockingbird extended family Model	8
5.3 Mainstream Support and Supervision and Retention of Foster Carers – activity and performance	10
5.4 Connected Carers Assessment and Support and Special Guardianship Team – activity performance	12
6. Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer	13
7. Overall performance of the Service in 2021/22 (Key Performance Indicators)	



1. 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 family and friends (connected persons) assessment and training, support, and supervision of all carers.

The staff teams which make up the fostering service are centralised and have an office base in Middlewich, although the majority of staff continue to be able to work remotely with a recent return to a 40%/60% of office-based presence and continued remote working. It 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 children and young people 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 aim to provide internal 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.

The service is founded on good relationships with foster carers, with children and their social workers. We aim to work in partnership with foster carers, ensuring that foster carers 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 whenever it is safe and appropriate be placed with extended family as connected carers in their own community.

The Head of Service is responsible for the strategic development of the fostering service and line management of the Fostering Service Manager who is responsible for ensuring that the Fostering Service meets the statutory duties and responsibilities required by the National Minimum Standards (NMS) and Fostering Regulations.

The NMS, together with Regulations relevant to the placement of children in foster care such as the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (the 2011 Regulations), form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 (CSA) for the conduct of fostering services.



The fostering support workers provide support to the service in respect of ensuring that recruitment activity is undertaken, checks are completed and who provide general and targeted support, for example, running 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.

The Service Manager works closely with the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) who is line managed within the independent Safeguarding, Review and Quality Assurance Service.

The Business Administrative Support Team is line managed through a separate line of accountability but is also part of the fostering service.

2. Teams in the Fostering Service

We have five teams in the Fostering Service:

- **Mainstream Recruitment and Assessment Team** – is comprised of 2.5 full time equivalent supervising 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.

The team have been providing support and supervision to new carers following approval until the first review at 6 months. 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** – is currently comprised of 8.5 full time equivalent supervising social workers and a team manager.
- This team's primary function is the assessment, support and supervision of family and friends (connected foster carers). SWs from the team go out with children's social workers to see family and friends named by children's parents when a child needs to be looked after by someone other than a birth parent.
- Supervising SWs will advise and support the child's social worker in the application of fostering regulations and to assist in determining suitability of family and friends to be assessed under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Review Regulations to be given temporary approval as a foster care to provide emergency care to a child who is accommodated by the local authority.
- The team also undertake viability assessments and full fostering assessments of connected carers and provide support and supervision once children are placed and/or 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 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 providing necessary equipment to carers.
- **Mockingbird Support and Supervision Team** –this team is comprised of 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 launched on 27 January 2022.
- The Mockingbird team also supervises and supports some mainstream carers who are not Mockingbird carers. This is a legacy position because 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** – this team is made up of 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 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 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 providing necessary equipment to carers.
- **Business Administrative Support Team** – This team has one full time senior unit coordinator and 4-unit coordinators, 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.

3. Fostering Panel

The Fostering Panel is critical to the business of the Fostering Service and is a legal requirement. The Panel meets approximately three times per month to consider panel business.

A new independent Fostering Panel Chair, Reshma Kodampur was appointed in December 2021 and took over responsibility for chairing the Panel in January 2022, following a brief induction and opportunity to observe the Panel.

The Panel is assisted by Panel Advisor, Richard Watts who is employed by Cheshire East. The service and Panel advisor 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.



There is an annual report for 2021/22 which details the functions and work of the Panel which can be read alongside this report.

4. Fostering Development Board

Oversight and governance of the fostering service provided via a development board which consists of 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.

5. Summary of 2021 – 2022

This year has been a challenging period nationally for fostering services across the UK as the numbers of children and young people requiring a safe home have risen by 12% but the increase of people who have applied to become foster carers have risen by only 4%.

The Ofsted figures for 2020/21 show that there has been a national trend of increased numbers of people expressing an interest in fostering but a far less conversion rate of people who convert that interest into making an application and taking that step to becoming registered foster carers.

This has led to an increased pressure and demand on foster placements, this can be evidenced by the figures demonstrating the continuing trend to place children in more expensive IFA placements and in some cases placing children in residential care due to the shortage of foster placements for teenagers.

Many Cheshire East internal foster carers have responded to requests for them to consider taking on an additional child and are now providing a higher number of placements per household and many foster carers have come forwards to offer emergency placements for children and young people who have no safe place to stay.

The trend to continue to place children and young people with friends and family has continue to increase and we have seen this part of the service continue to grow.

The fostering service has undertaken a service re-structure that needs to be progressed and finalised. This has been delayed by the changes in the senior leadership team and has caused some instability and anxiety across the staff teams.



5.1 Mockingbird

The development and launch of the Mockingbird extended family model has been very successful in Cheshire East following a successful bid to the Department for Education to work alongside the Foster Network to develop the Mockingbird model.

We now have 2 active Mockingbird constellations each with their own home hub carers who offer excellent support and connections to the fostering households and children who are part of the Model. Foster Carers are very positive about the extended support that is offered by the model.

*There is an annual CE site-level summary workbook for 2021/22, which should be read alongside this report. (Please note that this is a password protected file, password is **Site_summary21/22**)*

The front page of the workbook comprises a dashboard summarising information CE has submitted during the reporting period April 2021 – March 2022. Here you will find a summary of participation in Mockingbird during the year, as well as group activities, support (including sleepovers, daytime support, and one-to-one support) and estimated outcomes

In addition to the dashboard, you can explore the background data on the other worksheets within the workbook. Filters enable information to be sorted by child, satellite family etc. to understand depth of support provided to individual households or journeys for children and young people.

5,2 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.

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 became evident that the reality and practicalities of Covid were disrupting the usual rhythms of foster carer recruitment, and further, that most local authorities nationally and across the Northwest were experiencing this, as well as IFAs.



This has been a trend experienced within Cheshire East and 2021/22 has seen a sharp decline in the number of enquiries and applications from people who wish to foster. There has been increasing pressures and challenges in finding suitable placements for the children and young people who need a safe home.

Number of households approved in the year (and trend)

Year	Primary care type offer	Households number
2017	Permanent	1
2017	Short term	11
2017	Family and Friends	31
2017	Fostering to adopt	4
2017	Short breaks – for children who are also looked after	10
2017	Not Known - deregistered	1
2018	Not permanent	16
2018	Family and Friends	51
2018	Fostering to adopt	1
2018	Short breaks – for children who are also looked after	2
2018	Not Known - deregistered	1
2019	Not permanent	6
2019	Family and Friends	39
2019	Fostering to adopt	1
2019	Not Known - deregistered	1
2020	Not permanent	7
2020	Family and Friends	46
2020	Fostering to adopt	2
2020	Short breaks – for children who are not otherwise looked after	1
2021	Permanent	5
2021	Not permanent	9
2021	Family and Friends	48
2021	Short breaks – for children who are not otherwise looked after	2
2022	Not permanent	11
2022	Family and Friends	49
2022	Fostering to adopt	1
2022	Short breaks – for children who are not otherwise looked after	2



Applications in the year by status

Application status	Households number
In progress	3
Application	3
Approved	5
Withdrawn by applicant	4

5.3 Mainstream Support and Supervision and Retention of Foster Carers

Number of households deregistered in the year (and trend)

Year	Households number
2017	43
2018	59
2019	78
2020	59
2021	36
2022	66

De-registrations in the year by reason

Deregistration reason	Households number
Ceased fostering because the family adopted the child/children	1
Ceased fostering because the family took out a special guardianship order for the child/children	16
Initiated by foster carer	13
Initiated by fostering service	34
Transferred to IFA	1
Unknown	1



5.4 Connected Carer Assessment and Support and Special Guardianship Team

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.

In 2021/22, we had 145 referrals for Viability Assessments. This resulted in 44 full connected persons assessments. Of these 44, 7 continue to provide placements to children under Care Orders, 4 have concluded on SGO.

Of the remaining 33,

5 concluded with a negative recommendation

11 withdrew

17 assessments were completed but placements not needed due to care plan decisions (child returned to parents or placed with another family member

We had 21 Reg 24 assessments, of these 10 concluded with full approval, 11 resulted in placements ending before the assessment was finished. We had 5 referrals for private SGO's, of these 4 concluded with orders made, 2 withdrew.

6. Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO)

All foster carers annual reviews have been chaired by the FIRO who has provided quarterly reports to the Fostering Development Board and the Fostering Panel throughout 2021/22.

Foster carer reviews have generally been held virtually, with some being held face to face. This has worked well for foster carers to have a choice of a virtual or face to face meeting as the covid restrictions has eased throughout 2021-22.



This year has been a challenging in respect of the process and timeliness of foster carers' fostering annual reviews one with the continued themes of: -

- Changes to the paperwork and workflow of the Annual Review process on Liquid Logic records managements system. Work has been completed to update the report format and the reporting of reviews but some glitches have remained as this work is part of the overall modernization of the LCS workflows for fostering
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- The FIRO has completed work with the LADO to ensure that all allegations and standards of care concerns have timescales and action plans are attached so that when reviews are held foster carers are clear about the work needed and the evidence base that is required for continued approval. This is starting to be embedded into practice and therefore timescales and action are improved.
- There continues to be challenges in obtaining the views of the Cared for Children's Social Workers and children for Foster Carers Annual Reviews. A meeting was held with the Children's council where their views were sought, and these will be incorporated into the new process. This will continue to be part of the role of FIRO in encouraging the completion of these forms and escalating this where appropriate.
- There has been additional challenge in the reviewing service as the FIRO received increased feedback from foster carers that the Referral and Placement Planning Process and the completion of placement planning meetings and required paperwork including the medical and delegated consents is very variable and I am checking on the paperwork and foster carers being provided with sufficient good quality information about children at placement and their knowledge and understanding of Care Plans moving forward. As part of the Liquid Logic update we are requesting improved reporting and scrutiny of this element of the Cared for modules.
- A North West Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer Forum has been created to share good practice and develop common themes and standards for Fostering Reviews. We are group have created practice standards which will ensure that Local Authorities will have a more standardised format and standard for fostering reviews. This group also provides peer support and is developing a mutual information network.
- The second Mockingbird constellation is progressing well and the FIRO has designed a new review format for the home hub carer to reflect this difference in role for them. There is a real sense of the first constellation working well which includes activities for children within the constellation, a comment made by one of the children is that they are enjoying having contact with other cared for children. They have had a beetle drive and virtual bingo in the recent weeks and are planning monthly activities for the children in constellation.



- The FIRO also plans to review the Connected Persons/Family and Friends carers annual review format to ensure that their role is reflected in the paperwork and ensure that children's voices are reflected properly.
- 72% (138) of foster carer reviews were held within the statutory timescales of 12 months on time, and 21.6% (38) were out of timescale. Reasons for being out of timescale usually related to 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.

7. Overall performance of the Service in 2021/22 (Key Performance Indicators)

Number of households and places at 31 March (and trend)

Year	Number of households	Number of places
2017	160	289
2018	169	300
2019	144	230
2020	146	228
2021	162	264
2022	155	261

Number of households by primary care type offer (and trend)

Year	Primary care type offer	Households number
2017	Permanent	40
2017	Not permanent	1
2017	Short term	68
2017	Family and Friends	36
2017	Fostering to adopt	1
2017	Short breaks – for children who are also looked after	10
2017	Short breaks - for children who are not otherwise looked after	4
2018	Permanent	36
2018	Not permanent	72
2018	Family and Friends	50
2018	Short breaks – for children who are also looked after	8
2018	Short breaks - for children who are not otherwise looked after	3
2019	Permanent	39
2019	Not permanent	57
2019	Family and Friends	35
2019	Fostering to adopt	1
2019	Short breaks – for children who are	9



	also looked after	
2019	Short breaks - for children who are not otherwise looked after	3
2020	Permanent	37
2020	Not permanent	50
2020	Family and Friends	48
2020	Fostering to adopt	1
2020	Short breaks – for children who are also looked after	6
2020	Short breaks - for children who are not otherwise looked after	4
2021	Permanent	40
2021	Not permanent	53
2021	Family and Friends	62
2021	Short breaks – for children who are also looked after	2
2021	Short breaks - for children who are not otherwise looked after	5
2022	Permanent	38
2022	Not permanent	53
2022	Family and Friends	57
2022	Short breaks – for children who are also looked after	5
2022	Short breaks - for children who are not otherwise looked after	2

Number of carers at 31st March by ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of carers
Any Other Ethnicity	4
Asian Other	2
Black African	1
Black Caribbean	1
Mixed Other	1
White British	245
White Irish	1

Number of carers at 31st March by training status

TSD status	Number of carers
Not known 6	6
Not yet commenced	57
Training in progress	22
Awaiting sign off	2
Workbook Completed	168



Placement use at 31st March

Number of children	Number of vacant places	Number of not available places	Number of places used for SB care
197	19	40	7

Number of not available places on 31st March by reason

Not available reason	Number of not available places
Carer reasons (not otherwise specified)	10
Carer(s) taking a break/pending resignation	3
Carer(s) under investigation	4
Needs of child currently in placement (not otherwise stated)	3
Only available if sibling group placed	10
Used by CYP Staying Put after turning 18	5
Used for Short Breaks - CYP not otherwise looked after (POFShC)	5

