7.0   Review Findings

7.1   Introduction

7.2.1   Children in Care of a local authority are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The majority of children in care are there because they have suffered abuse or neglect. At any one time around 60,000 children are looked after in England, a trend which continues to be on an upward curve with cases becoming ever more complex and resource intensive.

7.2.2   Whilst these children and young people are placed in various types of care, including residential care and specialist care placements, it is widely recognised that for many, foster care is the preferred option. As it is closest to a family environment, the outcomes for those placed in foster care can be more positive than for those in other types of care placement. Additionally, foster care placements cost substantially less than residential placements, a not inconsequential fact considering the difficult economic climate and ever increasing demand on social care resources. For these reasons, and in particular the former, the Group felt that foster care should be the preferred care option for most children, where deemed appropriate.

7.2.3   Considering this, Members partaking in the review felt that it was important to find out whether all was being done by Cheshire East to maximise its ability to meet the demand on foster placements. Realising that increasing the number, diversity and range of placements has a direct impact on reducing the dependency on residential placements and private foster agencies, we endeavoured to analyse the recruitment of foster carers and their subsequent retention. Evaluating the retention of foster carers led naturally to an interest in how they are supported, not only by the services within Cheshire East but also by partner authorities in education and health. Whilst obviously interested in how these services work for foster carers, it was also felt important to consider their impact on the children and young people themselves.

7.2.4   Prior to starting the research process and getting answers to these questions, it was deemed vital that we fully understood the situation and context in Cheshire East.

8.0 Foster Care in Cheshire East

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

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

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

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

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

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

<u>Foster Carer Approvals – (n) denotes placement(s) created</u>

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

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

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

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

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

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

Summary of Fostering Budget Forecast

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

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

		0-4 Years		16+ years
Basic	(£125.09 x52)	£6,504.68	(£215.74 x 52)	£11,218.48
Initial Clothing		£264.00		£538.00
Birthday		£125.09		£215.74
Holiday		£312.73		£539.35
Religious		£125.09		£215.74
		£7,331.59		**£13,166.51**
Disability Allowance	(£137.62 x 52)	£7,156.24	(£237.30 x 52)	£12,339.60
		£7,938.15		**£13,166.51**
Payment for Skills (per child)				
Band 1	(£62.44 x 52)	**£10,578.47**		**£15,974.19**
Band 2	(£93.66 x 52)	**£12,201.91**		**£17,597.63**
Band 3	(£156.10 x 52)	**£15,448.79**		**£20,844.51**
Salaried Carers	(£421 x 52)	**£29,223.59**		**£34,619.31**
Additional Costs paid: School Trips/Holidays School Uniform Ethnic, racial and cultural costs Travel, Telephone & Hospitality Rite of Passage gift - £100				

8.2 Following this brief, Members designed a wide-ranging and comprehensive research programme. After this process, the Review Group's findings fell naturally into the following main themes:

- Recruitment of foster carers – including improving choice by increasing the diversity and range of placements.
- Retention of foster carers – including support, training and payment to improve placement stability
- Educational attainment for those in foster care
- The health and wellbeing of children and young people in foster care
- The successful transition of young people leaving care
- Systems and administrative processes with the Foster Care Service.
- Link to early intervention agenda.

8.2.1 A number of these themes do not exist in isolation from each other. Indeed, they are all part of the same issue with a number of cross-cutting and recurrent themes. For instance, an increase in the amount

of foster carers recruited would result in less pressure on existing carers, reducing placement disruption and improving retention. Similarly, the work of partners in health and education plays a big part in reducing disruption and resignations. For the purpose of clarity, these issues have been put into respective themes with the main arguments outlined in the conclusion.

9.0   **Themes**

9.1   **Recruitment of Foster Carers**

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

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

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

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

9.1.6   **Advertising and Marketing**

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

9.1.8   In the site visit to Stoke-on-Trent City Council's (henceforth Stoke-on-Trent) fostering service, they outlined how they are running their fostering service recruitment strategy 'like a business' and they

continued to assert that this is the only way that local authorities will be able to *manage the market*.

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

9.1.10 Under this brand identity, a lot of work has been done to strengthen the recruitment process for those interested in becoming foster carers or in adopting. For instance, a dedicated stand-alone website and dedicated fostering and adoption hotline have been purchased and a number of events have been organised and ran successfully. Additionally, it was discovered that every effort was being made to make sure that the FACE brand achieved as much coverage as possible in a number of publications and advertising spaces.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

9.1.19 **Other methods to improve recruitment**

9.1.20 When interviewed, the Chair of the Fostering Panel suggested that one thing that would help improve recruitment would be for Cheshire East to have the ability to pay for home alterations. One of the most common reasons why carers do not proceed with their initial expression of interest is due to their lack of space at home. It would be cost effective for

Cheshire East therefore, to pay the commercial mortgage rates for the modifications whilst the carer is in the employment of the authority as this would mean that we would not have to place a child in an IFA. Similarly, Cheshire East could pay for the modifications needed for a carer to look after a disabled child, negating the need for the authority to place them in an expensive and non-family orientated residential placement. This concept would also extend to existing carers who wish to take on another placement but again do not have the requisite space or wish to allow sibling group placements. This proposal mirrors similar schemes in other local authority fostering services. It should also be explored whether there is provision in the disabled facilities grant to assist with such a programme.

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

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

9.2   **Retention of Foster Carers**

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

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

9.2.3   **Placements**

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

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

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

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

strategy so that the most sought after placements can be sourced and provided.

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

9.2.9 **Training**

9.2.10 Whether or not a carer is newly approved or has ten years experience, the training that Cheshire East provides is vital in making sure that they are fully prepared to cope with the myriad of demands that will be placed upon them.

9.2.11 The Group were made aware that since the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), training for foster carers had been a shared service until April 2010. The resulting disaggregation of resources left Cheshire West and Chester with a disproportionate amount of resources. As a result, Cheshire East has almost had to 'start from scratch' to construct its own training programme.

9.2.12 The first step in this process was to send out a questionnaire to foster carers to ask them what training they wanted or had found useful in the past. Following from this, aspects such as times, venues and content of events had been tailored in a bespoke manner to match that of the carers needs. It is this self-imposed practice of monitoring and evaluation that left the Group feeling confident that training will always be relevant and tailored to the individual and collective needs of carers. This approach is commended and should be continued.

9.2.13 Even considering this, there were a few issues regarding the training process that emerged from the evidence gathering process. Indeed, in speaking to the foster carers themselves, it seems that a common theme emerged around the appropriateness of training in terms of the level that it is pitched at. This is obviously a very difficult thing to get right when a course needs to cater for a wide demographic but it was noted that for more experienced carers a more workshop based programme would be useful. It was felt that they could be involved in delivering some training themselves, making best use of their experience and skills.

9.2.14 Additionally, it was noted that some foster carers interviewed felt that the portfolio that they had to complete during pre-approval training was somewhat cumbersome and repetitive. The Group are aware that this is a statutory document that requires completion but it is suggested that perhaps it could be streamlined or even made available to be completed online. Furthermore, if the document is a requirement, the importance of completing it should be communicated clearly to the carers.

9.2.15 Attention was drawn to the possibility for providing training for the safe handling of children and young people as carers do not feel appropriately equipped to do this at the current time.

9.2.16 As with all local authority budgets, money for resources is sparse. However, the Group felt that it would be greatly beneficial if a budget was made available so that the service can purchase a small library of publications from the Safer Caring Foster Network for the use of foster carers. This would compliment the training support and development standards (Children's Workforce Development Council) that foster carers have to meet.

9.2.17 As an aside, the Group would also want to outline the importance of maintaining financial support for those foster carers attending training events. Additionally, the Group would also like to see that Cheshire East are ensuring that foster carers have access to the internet as training resources move increasingly towards this medium.

9.2.18 **Support**

9.2.19 <u>Supervising Social Workers</u>

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

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

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

9.2.23 <u>Cared for Children's Support Team</u>

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

9.2.25 <u>Respite</u>

9.2.26 Respite can be vital in giving carers a break from the rigours of looking after cared for children. One carer interviewed said that they can 'get ground down very easily' and that a period of respite can make the difference between the placement breaking down or not or even the difference between the carer resigning or staying. The Group were made aware that it was difficult for carers to get respite, another symptom of the lack of carers in Cheshire East's pool. One option that could be explored is to use an organisation such as Dreamwall which provides 'time-out' breaks for foster carers and has reduced by 95 per cent the proportion of foster carers leaving fostering. The cost equated to £674.43 per child per year, and 182 children received the service. Using the social return on investment (SROI) method of calculating value and benefits as well as costs, there was a £1.63 return for every £1.00 invested in the project. One of the strongest elements of this programme is that they take the attitude that respite is not just for the carer but it should also be a positive experience for the child or young person. This reduces the feeling of rejection that some children in care feel when placed in respite.

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

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

9.2.29 <u>Out of Hours Support</u>

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

9.2.31 <u>Payments</u>

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

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

9.2.34 Throughout this review, the argument has been made that by increasing resources to the fostering service, Cheshire East would actually save money by reducing the amount it pays out to Residential Provision placements. Indeed, whilst it is difficult to determine an average cost per child due to the range of weekly rates the following clearly demonstrates the saving that can be made.

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

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

It is too difficult to separate out the amount we pay IFAS as compared to our own carers as each case can vary dramatically but as an

approximation the amount we pay IFAs is on average 3-4 times the amount that we pay our own carers. It is suggested therefore that a robust business case is compiled which investigates the benefit cost ratio of investing into fostering resources.

9.2.35 Making Foster Carers feel Valued

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

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

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

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

9.2.40 Improving the experience of new carers and new placements

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

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

9.2.42 <u>Link with Education and Health</u>

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

9.3 **Educational Attainment of those in Foster Care**

9.3.1 In 2008, 14 per cent of looked after children achieved five A*-C grades at GCSE, compared to 65.3 per cent for all children. Ensuring that looked after children have the right support to be able to participate fully in school life, and that their school career is not disrupted by constant placement moves can make a big difference. They may well have lost out on education because of the circumstances which led them entering care and need help to catch up. A high proportion of looked after children see entering care as having been good for their education, a national trend mirrored in the findings of this review.

9.3.2 It is important to recognise therefore that raising the attainment of Cared for Children is a central responsibility of local authorities and their partners in children's trust arrangements and a vital part of narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. It requires local authorities to work effectively with their partners, in particular schools and health services, to support their learning and development and remove barriers to their education. As corporate parents, local authorities are under a specific duty to promote the educational achievement of looked after children.

9.3.3 With this is in mind, the Group were highly encouraged by the work being carried out by the Virtual School and the Virtual Head and his team. After coming into existence on 1 September 2010, the Virtual School has continued to enable Cheshire East to take an overview of all of our Cared for Children and their progress. Within this, it also has a role to support and challenge schools and other agencies in how they work with our vulnerable children and young people. Important to highlight is the part the Virtual School plays in providing training, advice and support to foster carers, designated teachers and social workers, working to reduce the likelihood of placement disruption.

9.3.4 The Virtual School is also responsible for two funds which it uses to improve the outcomes for Cheshire East's Cared for Children. The first of these is the **Personal Educational Allowance (PEA)**. The origin of this fund is rooted in the white paper *Care Matters: Time for Change*, published in June 2007. This confirmed the Government's commitment to introduce an annual personal education allowance for all looked after children who are at risk of not reaching the national expected standards of attainment. They are intended to help local authorities support the wide range of learning needs of looked after children and give them access to additional learning and development activities. This support is tailored to their individual needs and children and young people should be actively involved in identifying barriers to their learning and in deciding what provision will help them overcome these challenges and make improved progress with their education.

9.3.5 Funding for personal educational allowance for Cared for Children comprises part of the local authority Area Based Grant (ABG), a non-ringfenced general grant. It is for local authorities to decide how best to use this funding to meet their duty to promote the educational achievement of looked after children. The Group would strongly suggest therefore that the Virtual Head is supported as much as possible to use this fund to improve the educational outcomes for our Cared for Children.

9.3.6 The Virtual School also has responsibility for the **Education Support Fund (ESF)**. This is one of the main tools of the Virtual School in our support of our Cared for Children's education. The flexibility of having finance that Cheshire East can put into schools to support Cared for Children in crisis has enabled the authority to maintain a large number of educational placements and has led to better outcomes for our children and young people. It also allows Cheshire East to be creative by combining funding for schools where there are higher numbers of Cared for Children. For example, in a Cheshire East Primary School, where there are currently 23 Cared for Children, the authority has funded a part time, temporary Learning Mentor who works specifically with Cared for Children. The mentor meets and greets the children on the playground and ensures a smooth start to the school day whilst also supporting them in lessons and providing them with a friendly face to go to at breaks and lunchtimes. The school has seen this initiative as helpful and successful although it is too early to measure the impact on individual attainment and progress.

Case study of successful use of ESF with individual children and young people
Names of the children have been changed to ensure anonymity

Peter – Year 3 Cheshire East Primary School (8 years old)
Peter is on an Interim Care Order following his adoption placement breakdown last year on 24 January 2010. Prior to this Peter's adoptive mother had sadly died. Peter along with his brother Joe (Year 5 – 10 years old) has had 3 placement breakdowns since this point. Peter and his brother lived with carers in an out-of-Borough area for a short while but the boys are currently living with a private agency foster carer in the North of the Borough but this placement is close to disruption also.

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

Peter's scores at end of KS1
2c Reading
2c Writing
2b Maths

Peter has been eligible for help through the PEA and this has been mainly used for afternoon activities as he finds it difficult to remain on task throughout the whole school day. ESF has also been used to provide TA support for Peter for help with his concentration, his behaviour and his learning. Despite this additional support however, Peter remained in precarious situation. Considering this, additional ESF was requested and this is being used to provide Peter with full-time support. His current timetable is:
- mornings – literacy/numeracy with TA support
- afternoons – various supported activities (visits to farm/riding/therapeutic horticulture – plus activities with an officer from the Virtual School for Cared for Children)

Peter's scores at end of Autumn Term
Reading - 2b (1 part move in term)
Writing - 2b (1 part move in term)
Maths - 3b (3 part move in term) - excellent progress and he is very keen to improve.

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

9.3.7 As can be seen from the example above, the ESF is achieving some impressive outcomes for our Cared for Children. It is also important to note that a high percentage of Cared for Children are at risk of exclusion. The cost of permanently excluding a child is hard to calculate but research by Fairbridge (2008) states that the average lifetime cost of crime of an excluded child is £15,527. It is also clear that the costs of pupils being educated via a Pupil Referral Unit or through out of borough educational provision is much higher than the cost of putting early support using ESF The group would suggest therefore that ensuring that the ESF is kept as a resource will firstly improve the educational outcomes of Cared for Children and secondly that if kept it will save Cheshire East a considerable amount of money in the longer term.

9.3.8 During the evidence gathering process it became clear that there are other things that Cheshire East could do to improve the educational outcomes for Cared for Children beyond that of supporting the excellent work being carried out by the Virtual School.

9.3.9 Indeed, the Chair of the Fostering Panel drew attention to the importance of the resources that reside within the educational environment for the fostering service. In particular it was noted that the reports that the educational psychologists produce are very useful for the panel when they are reviewing a child's forward plan or when conducting a sibling assessment. The Group would suggest therefore that when resources are being allocated, due thought is given to the potential unintended consequences on placement disruption that a loss of educational psychologists or other specialists might cause.

9.3.10 One aspect that the Group uncovered was in respect to the educationalist settings in which we place our out of Borough children and young people. Indeed, it was made apparent that there is currently no way of knowing the quality of these placements and their value for money as we are relying on little more than word of mouth in assessing their appropriateness. As Cheshire East has a responsibility for the well being of these children and young people, it is vital that a comprehensive register of the appropriateness of these settings is compiled and that a rigorous quality assurance programme is put in place to monitor it. The newly appointed contracts officer should ensure that this is addressed.

9.3.11 In terms of the feedback from the young people in care, it was pleasing to note that on the whole they had a positive experience in their respective schools. Having said this, there was some feeling that they were being over-monitored by teachers and that this was singling them out in an unhelpful way. The Group recognise that it can be difficult to get the balance correct between providing appropriate support and not making the child or young person feel different. It was suggested that the Virtual School could provide some training for teachers to improve this situation.

9.3.12 The Group would also like to draw attention to the importance of maintaining placements nearby to the preferred education setting. This promotes placement stability and helps to reduce disruption. The new placements team will help to improve this.

9.3.13 If there is no way to maintain the educational setting then attempts must be made to make the transition as seamless as possible. There is a role for the designated teachers in each setting to play here with the support of the virtual school.

9.4 **Health and Wellbeing of those in Foster Care**

9.4.1 Looked after children and young people share many of the same health risks and problems as their peers, but they frequently enter care with a worse level of health due to the impact of poverty, abuse and neglect. Evidence suggests that looked after children are nearly five times more likely to have a mental health disorder than all children. Local authorities, primary care trusts (PCT) and strategic health authorities (SHA) must have regard to statutory guidance issued in November 2009 on promoting the health and well-being of Cared for Children, which requires children in care to have a personal health plan.

9.4.2 In reviewing the evidence in relation to health and Cared for Children, it became immediately apparent that there are a number of inherent systemic failings. Local authorities, PCTs and SHAs have a role to play in promoting the health and well-being of Cared for Children. Precisely what this role looks like for each authority is unclear and will continue to be so until the new structural changes to the NHS are consolidated. With this in mind, the Group feels that it would be germane to commission a Task and Finish Review to further consider the observations in this review when there is both more detail and clarity.

9.4.3 As is a recurrent theme throughout this review, issues around Cared for Children become increasingly complicated and difficult to handle when either a Cheshire East child is placed out of Borough or an out of Borough child is placed with a Cheshire East family/carer. Both the Designated Nurses for Cared for Children expressed a concern over how health information about a child often emerges in an ad hoc fashion and sometimes emerges with large gaps in their medical history. This is often a symptom of professionals being unclear as to whose responsibility it is to maintain records and then subsequently who is responsible for filing or passing them to the appropriate person when necessary. As Cared for Children often have both acute and chronic health problems this is a serious issue which could have potentially damaging consequences. It was suggested that in any new arrangement a system needs to be put in place that everyone involved in health and Cared for Children understands and complies with. As the administrative burdens are only going to increase on professionals as back office staff are reduced, it will become even more important to maintain efficiencies in work flow.

9.4.4 One of the key front line roles in terms of health and cared for children is that of the Designated Nurse. There are currently two Designated Nurses for Cared for Children in Cheshire East with one based in Nantwich and one based in Macclesfield. They have two administrative support staff (1FTE). Their primary role is to make sure that every cared for child has their health and development needs assessed and that their subsequent health plan is actioned. The Group were informed that both Designated Nurses are only contracted to work part-time but that to meet their work demands they often have to work up to and beyond full time hours. It was explained to the Group that there is a particular concern over the

16+ age group in terms of the relevant authorities not meeting their health needs due to under capacity. This has a number of knock on effects – particularly around teenage pregnancy. It was suggested that there is a strong need for a Designated Nurse or a youth worker for young people and care leavers. In order to improve work flow, communication and efficiencies, the Group would suggest that incorporating the Designated Nurses into the offices and if possible the management structures of the Fostering and Adoption teams would have beneficial consequences. It would be particularly useful if further liaison between the Designated Nurses and the Cared for Children Support team could be facilitated.

9.4.5 As a further improvement, the Designated Nurses highlighted that they would appreciate systems put in place that would enable them to self-audit and benchmark.

9.4.6 Whilst much of the evidence around health and Cared for Children centred on big strategic improvements which Cheshire East may or may not have the ability to implement following the public health restructures, there are also smaller but important changes that Cheshire East can make to improve the well being of Cared for Children right away.

9.4.7 Furthermore, in terms of their access to leisure facilities, it was noted that whilst Cheshire East provides very well in terms of discounts and passes, what is available for Cared for Children is perhaps not communicated as clearly as it could be.

9.4.8 As a final point, the Group would very much like to draw attention to the importance of the advocacy service that Barnardos offers to Cared for Children. They offer an excellent external point of contact and outlet for those who may wish to talk about the service they receive without talking to the person who provides it.

9.5   Successful transition for those leaving care

9.5.1   For many young people, leaving care can be daunting and confusing. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sets out local authorities' responsibility to help children leaving care develop a 'pathway plan' to independence, with the help of a personal adviser and other people who have had an impact on their life. While care can end at the age of 16, it continues until age 18 if the child remains at school. Continuing assistance with education or training continues to the end of the agreed programme, even if it takes some past the age of 21.

9.5.2   Care leavers are still over-represented in prison populations and the unemployed, demonstrating that the experience of being in – and leaving – care still does not prepare young people well for adult life. If looked after children followed the same paths as other children into further education, training and jobs, it could save the economy £50m each year.

9.5.3   It is also important to remember that although in some cases Cheshire East supports young people past the age of 21, this is only in rare cases. According to the Office of National Statistics more than a third of men and a fifth of women still live at home between the age of 20 and 34. Many cite the lack of affordable housing and increasing financial pressures as reasons for this. It seems unreasonable therefore for Cheshire East in its role as corporate parent to expect its care leavers who are already comparatively disadvantaged to be able to make an unassisted transition to adulthood.

9.5.4   The Group were informed that there is a 16 plus Service in place which helps young people to make the transition from care to self-dependence. Making up this team is the independence advisor for young people and an administration support officer. It was explained that key to the work of this team is their ability to liaise with adult services, particularly when they are dealing with a disabled young person, in order to achieve a seamless a transition as possible. Attention was drawn to the electronic recording systems for both children's and adult's services which are incompatible at the current time. This is causing difficulties in terms of information sharing and the Group would like to suggest that a new system is considered.

9.5.5   In terms of securing housing, the practice of young people leaving care going to hostels has been superseded by supported lodgings of which there are 12 in Cheshire East. When the young person is older than 18 they are no longer eligible for supported lodgings and therefore they have to access accommodation from housing associations. It was explained that this is often difficult for young people, particularly in Macclesfield and also in terms of securing single person accommodation. It can be seen therefore how important it is to get the corporate parenting strategy embedded as quickly as possible in Cheshire East so that officers in Housing can attempt to start improving this situation.

9.5.6 Youth employment is an issue for all young people regardless of background but it is particularly an issue for those young people leaving care. At the moment Cheshire East endeavours to get care leavers onto apprenticeship schemes and there are currently 5 young people on this programme. Attempts are being made to increase these numbers. The Care leaving service also work closely with Connexions which has proven a great success. Unfortunately due to increasing number of Cared for Children and decreasing numbers of staff, this work is getting more difficult. In terms of securing an extra resource, there could be an argument for employing the aforementioned (health section) 16+ youth worker to have a role that extends beyond just health but encompasses all elements of pastoral care, including employment and housing.

9.5.7 Having said this, there are also improvements that Cheshire East could make without any increase in capacity. In the feedback session with the Children in Care Council, the Group were informed how one young person had been offered a job but that they were unable to take it due to transport costs. However, Cheshire East now pay her transport costs to attend college despite it being further away and the young person having the preference to go into employment. It is suggested that more flexibility is sought in how we provide transport subsidies.

9.5.8 In addition to this, the session with the Children in Care Council also made the Group aware of the practice of 'sofa surfing'. This is where young people spend a night with a friend in the absence of more permanent accommodation. It was suggested that whilst this is not a desirable outcome, in the interim there could be provided a central facility to which young people can come and use a kitchen, bathroom and washing machine. Such a facility could also be used a place to 'train' young people in how to become independent as part of their pathway plan – something that was noted as being wanted by the Children in Care Council. It was explained that the current facilities at Bradshaw House and Sunnyside are not fit for purpose and that new accommodation would need to be sought.

9.5.9 In terms of assisting young people when they go to university, Cheshire East currently pays £90 per week for maintenance. Whilst this is obviously helpful, it is the time away from university, between terms, that can be problematic. Most young people return to the family home for what can be a considerable period and yet this option is obviously not available for young people still in care. When speaking to foster carers, it was suggested that Cheshire East could pay the carer a retainer whilst the placement becomes available as respite in the meantime. This would offer the young person some security for when they return home and reduce anxiety of another change.

9.5.10 Furthermore, the foster carers that were spoken to for this review, commented that they felt the service does not use them enough once the young person has left care. It was suggested that they could retain a mentoring role during a transition period.

9.6   **Systems and Administrative processes within the Foster Care Service**

9.6.1   One particular recurring theme of this review, of which there are many, is that there needs to be improvements made to the systems and administrative processes around the fostering service. Indeed, numerous examples have been cited throughout this review such as the placement team linking with marketing, resignations/disruptions being monitored so that this can be fed back to support mechanisms and a multitude of systems around health and cared for children. At the core of all of these is the practice of recording information and then subsequently sharing it in an easily accessible fashion.

9.6.2   It was this practice that was the key finding behind Stoke-on-Trent's recent success. Indeed, it was their development of clear and robust performance monitoring systems which allowed for trends to be tracked and provided evidence of success for Ofsted. The Group strongly believes that Cheshire East has some equally good practice which will only improve with the new structure. Therefore, it is vital that Cheshire East can demonstrate this so as to benefit from all the good work and outcomes achieved.

9.6.3   Beyond just getting the staff to start recording information more, Stoke-on-Trent facilitated their ability to share information in such a quick and timely way by making sure that all of their relevant staff are based in the same office, with as little hot desking as possible. This ensures that the service is flexible and is able to deal with requests quickly and with all the appropriate information. It also helps them to monitor trends and to plan strategies accordingly. The Group would strongly suggest that such a model is replicated in Cheshire East.

9.6.4   The point was also made during the site visit to Stoke-on-Trent, that the only way the Local Authorities can maximise their offer as opposed to IFAs is to make the most of the 'corporateness of the council'. In other words, as local authorities will always pay less than private agencies we must sell the value added by our close partnerships with other authorities such as education and health. Of course, the flip side of this is that Cheshire East must make sure that its partnerships are fully utilised to make good on this promise. The Corporate Parenting Strategy should go a long way to ensure this and the Group would like to add their support for this to be embedded as quickly as possible.

9.6.5   What has been mentioned above are some very general observations on how administrative systems and performance monitoring could be improved. During the evidence gathering process, the Group were also made aware of a number of specific examples which require attention.

9.6.6   Firstly, it was brought to our attention that there is a situation, known as private fostering in which an arrangement is made to look after a child who is under 16 years of age (under 18 if disabled) for more than 28

days, where the main carer is someone other than the child's parent, legal guardian, step- parent, sibling, grandparent, aunt or uncle.

9.6.7 What distinguishes a private fostering arrangement from a public care fostering arrangement is that it is not arranged by nor paid for by the Local Authority. Having said this, both the child's parents and the private foster carers have a duty to notify the Children and Families Service of their intention to place the child in private foster care no less than six weeks before and no more than 13 weeks before the arrangement is intended to start (unless it is an emergency, in which case we should be informed no more than 48 hours after the child has been placed.

9.6.8 It was reported that it is not always the case that service is notified that the child has been placed with private foster care. This obviously cause for concern as the Authority do not know where the children are. The service is aware of this and has launched a campaign to increase awareness. To go beyond this campaign however, a system needs to be embedded in which links are made with education and health professionals who then flag up concerns over what might be a private fostering situation.

9.6.9 Secondly, there was a concern expressed over the lack of communication between the out-of-hours duty desk and the 9-5 duty desk which has resulted in records not being kept as accurately as they could be. Attempts should be made to have both teams working on the same system. Additionally, having all teams in the same office would improve the ability to pass on information without continually depending on systems.

9.6.10 Lastly, considering the extent to which Cheshire East are losing Foster Carers due to resignation, it would be germane to conduct exit interviews so that trends could be monitored and analysed with specific areas for improvement then targeted.

9.7   **Link with Early intervention Agenda**

9.7.1   Any child coming into the care of a local authority is obviously an undesirable outcome. It is proven that a child develops best in a loving family environment. Further to this, as has been mentioned throughout this report, resources are becoming scarcer and therefore spread more thinly around an ever increasing cohort of Cared for Children.

9.7.2   Consequently, it is vital that the fostering service makes strong and purposeful links with the early intervention agenda. The better· the service can identify families at risk, the quicker it can provide support and guidance resulting in less children entering care.

9.7.3   For instance, aligned to the corporate parenting agenda, if some parents had better quality housing, it is unlikely that their children would ever come into care. Similarly strong links should be made with the Homestart and SureStart programmes. There are a multitude of other examples of where Cheshire East, with its myriad of skills and abilities throughout the organisation can work to keep children out of care.

10.0 Conclusions

10.1   The genesis of this review came from the belief that if a child must be placed under the care of the local authority, the best place for that child, in most situations, is in a family setting. Following three months of careful and extensive research that belief still holds as strong, if not more so. The Group were heartened to find in all cases, professionals who clearly had Cheshire East's children as a priority and who were doing excellent work in continually improving their practice. Indeed, the Group strongly believes that the new structure currently being embedded throughout the service will yield some exciting results in the future months and years.

10.2   With this in mind, the Group would like to stress the importance of targeting resources towards the fostering service. Rather than being idealistic, this is a policy that has a strong invest to save business case behind it. Hopefully this review has adequately illustrated the savings available to Cheshire East in increasing its own fostering placements thereby reducing our dependency on expensive IFA and residential placements.

10.3   Whilst increasing payments to foster carers to make them as competitive as possible, is an important and central issue for increasing recruitment and retention and thereby making the aforementioned savings, the Group were made aware that Cheshire East will never be able to compete financially with IFAs. Therefore, it is vital that Cheshire East makes the most of its links with other agencies both internally and externally to provide as good a service as possible to its cared for children. Indeed, there is a real need to look at the systems and administrative processes around fostering to make sure we are making the most of our resources.

10.4   One issue that does not have a cost attached to it and yet is vital for improving retention is making sure that our Foster Carers feel appreciated and valued. Indeed, there seems in some respects, a tacit understanding of a hierarchical structure in place in which foster carers are seen as separate from other professionals. Whilst recognising that there are distinct differences in roles, the Group would like to see our carers explicitly stated as part of the professional service and indeed, Cheshire East going above and beyond in recognising the service they provide for our most vulnerable children.

11.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 That all staff involved in the Fostering & Adoption service be situated on a single site, where appropriate.

11.2 That in line with the corporate parenting strategy, all corporate policies must consider their impact on cared for children.

11.3 That consideration be given to a renewed focus on recruitment and assessment of mainstream foster carers in order to ensure that Cheshire East Council meets its sufficiency requirements.

11.4 That Cheshire East continues to provide support and resources for the recruitment of foster carers.

11.5 That the process from initial expression of interest to approval by panel be given a speedy, yet achievable timescale from which clear milestones are communicated to both prospective carers and staff throughout the development of the application.

11.6 That prospective carers moving through the application process be paired with an experienced carer as a mentor.

11.7 That an investigation be carried out to assess the viability of creating a budget to enable Cheshire East to pay commercial mortgage rates for home modifications in order to allow prospective carers take on their first or additional placements.

11.8 That the information from placement request forms in terms of demand in particular placements be made available to the recruitment officer to inform the marketing strategy.

11.9 That 'disruption meetings' along the lines of the Stoke-on-Trent model be held with foster placements that have been identified as being at risk of disruption.

11.10 That experienced foster carers be used in delivering training sessions or work shops to make best use of their professional skills.

11.11 That a budget be made available for the service to either purchase a small library of publications from the Safer Foster Carer Network for the use of foster carers or to explore web-based training opportunities.

11.12 That training be provided for the safe handling of Children in Care.

11.13 That financial support be maintained for carers attending training events.

11.14 That support and resources for the Cared For Children's Support Team be maintained.

11.15 That the possibility of making links with Cheshire East Leisure Facilities under the auspices of the Corporate Parenting Strategy be investigated to provide respite breaks using the same principles of the Dreamwall project. Within this, that the possibility of reciprocal relationships with adjacent authorities be explored in terms of respite facilities – particularly for Cheshire East children placed out-of-Borough.

11.16 That Cheshire East formalises the on-going support that foster carers provide for themselves in partnership with appropriate fostering networks.

11.17 That the possibility of links being made with the family support service to assist with out-of-hours support for foster carers be investigated. In addition, that the service explore the possibility of commissioning an out-of-hours support line.

11.18 That the awards night be continued, currently undertaken by the Cheshire Foster Carer Association, to recognise the achievements of our Children in Care and the contributions of our foster carers.

11.19 That foster carers be provided with the contact details of their local Councillors.

11.20 That a 'starter pack' be produced for each new placement which provides the requisite information about the child/young person with a small, flexible budget.

11.21 That support and resources for the Virtual School be maintained including the Personal Educational Allowance, Education Support Fund and educational psychologists.

11.22 That a comprehensive register of the appropriateness of out-of-Borough educational settings is compiled with a rigorous quality assurance programme put in place to monitor it.

11.23 That the Virtual School provides training to teachers so that they provide an appropriate level of support for Cared for Children and assist in any transitional processes between settings.

11.24 That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the processes, systems and staffing issues around health and Cared for Children.

11.25 That a new electronic recording system be purchased to ensure seamless information sharing between children's and adult's services.

11.26 That links are made with Registered Social Landlords to secure decent housing for care leavers, particularly in the Macclesfield area.

11.27 That a fit-for-purpose facility be procured so to curtail the practice of 'sofa-surfing' and to assist in the training of young people as they prepare for independence.

11.28 That Cheshire East pays a retainer to Foster Carers for keeping open a placement for a young person at university.

11.29 That strong performance monitoring systems be put in place and embedded throughout the fostering service.

11.30 That exit interviews be conducted on all foster carers who resign from the service and the resulting information be analysed for trends.

11.31 That links are made, whenever possible, with the early intervention agenda – particularly with the SureStart programme.

11.32 That Cheshire East's payment rates be constantly tracked against and compared to our geographical and statistical neighbours

11.33 That a business case be commissioned which investigates the benefit cost ratio of investing in fostering services to reduce dependency on residential placements and IFAs.

11.34 That a Task and Finish Review be established to examine the 16 plus service for cared for children.

12.0 Background Information

12.1 For Background information relating to this report, please get in touch with the report author:

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