

Corporate Parenting Committee

Date of Meeting: 29 September 2020

Report Title: Fostering Service Annual Review Report

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Kathryn Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

Senior Officer: Mark Palethorpe, Executive Director of People

1. Report Summary

1.1. This report will update the Corporate Parenting Committee on the recruitment and support activity of the fostering service as well as the actions that we are taking in developing and improving the service for our staff, our foster carers and most importantly our cared for children. The first part of the report will focus on the recruitment and support activity over the past twelve months and the second part will focus on the improvement journey that we are undertaking.

2. Recommendation/s

2.1. Corporate Parenting Committee is asked to:

- Note the contents of the report
- Provide support and challenge to the development work and progress required to improve fostering services.

3. Reasons for Recommendation/s

3.1. The Corporate Parenting Committee plays a key role in scrutinising and challenging performance to improve outcomes for cared for children and young people.

4. Other Options Considered

4.1 None; this is an update report.

5. Background

Recruitment and Support

- 5.1 Over the last year, the Fostering Service has embarked upon a programme of renewal and improvement. The need to recruit foster carers remains our highest priority and has some additional urgency owing to the increase in demand for the service as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions. The current cohort of mainstream foster carers is largely made up of people over the age of 50; this means that there continues to be a need to bring in younger people and provide support and training to enable them to become the experienced and stable fostering population that every local authority needs.
- 5.2 In order to improve the mainstream recruitment position, we have reviewed some of the requirements we have had about the circumstances of foster carers, such as the need to have a car, the need to have one carer at home all day, and so on. This shift in our localised stipulations has resulted in an increase in enquiries and has enabled us to actively consider a wider group of individuals as prospective carers. In addition, we have also stepped up our in-house advertising efforts that will sit alongside the Foster 4 arrangements until we leave Foster 4 at the end of September. At that point we will have total responsibility for our own marketing and recruitment.
- 5.3 Since September 2019, the service has had 275 enquiries from people interested in becoming a mainstream foster carer. The service progresses each one of these enquiries, contacting the enquirer and having a general discussion about fostering and answering all the questions that they may have. Following this, if the person feels that they would like to explore this further, and where we consider that they are suitable, we then complete a formal Expression of Interest form with them. After this, an Initial Visit takes place (virtually at the present time) and where this is positive, a formal Application Form is sent to the person for them to complete. Once the Application form is returned, an assessing Social Worker is allocated to undertake the full fostering assessment, which is a process normally taking 16 weeks.
- 5.4 In the year to date since September 2019, we have received 57 Expressions of Interest, and we will receive more before the end of this reporting period. The figure of 57 is an improvement on previous years, which is attributable to having changed our stipulations in terms of base requirements for prospective carers and to having combined the Foster 4

recruitment arrangements with our own targeted Cheshire East advertising.

5.5 Over the past year (since September 2019) the approval of foster carers has been as follows

Month	Mainstream Carers	Family and Friends Carers
Sept 2019	0	0
October 2019	2	2
November 2019	0	0
December 2019	0	2
January 2020	0	4
February 2020	2	1
March 2020	2	4
April 2020	0	2
May 2020	2	0
June 2020	1	2
July 2020	2	5
August 2020	1 (projected)	
September 2020	5 (projected)	

5.6 The overall picture in terms of mainstream assessment and recruitment is a positive one. At the time of writing we currently have 11 mainstream fostering households in assessment, which is the best position we have been in for some time (it should be noted that these are the assessments that are projected for August and September panels, and a further 5 assessments that will be presented to panel during December 2020). It is also worth highlighting that over the past 12 months we have recruited 4 foster carers who were previously employed by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA), the perception is often that foster carers leave to join IFA's, but this is clearly not the case. Those carers that have joined us describe the increased support and supervision as being their primary motivation for moving.

5.7 The flow of connected persons (family and friends foster carers) work into the service is very variable and generally at a high level. This arises because when children need to become cared for, the local authority must actively consider any extended family members who may be in a position to look after them and where this is going to be the permanence plan for the child, the person becomes the subject of a full fostering assessment.

5.8 In terms of people who have stopped fostering over the period, there have been 10 connected person households who have stopped fostering. This happens because sometimes the placement comes to an end, the young person may turn 18 and is therefore no longer a child, or more usually because the carer has sought and obtained a legal order (for example and Special Guardianship Order) which secures the child's permanence with them and ends the cared for episode, this is a very positive outcome for the child or young person. In some situations, the placement ends in an unplanned way and an alternative placement must be found for the child, which then means that the carer must resign as they are only approved to care for those particular children.

5.9 In respect of mainstream foster carers who no longer foster from September 2019 to September 2020 the reasons were:

Reason for stopping fostering	Number of fostering households
Allegation	1
Family Circumstances, including retirement	8
Health issues	1
Dispute with service	1
Placement disruption	1
De-registration	1
Total	13

5.10 For mainstream foster carers, there are sometimes tensions between the placed children and the birth children of the household, and this can contribute to the carers deciding to stop fostering. Clearly, the service works hard to resolve these issues and to make them manageable, we do specific work with birth children in order to help them to understand the issues that cared for children can have and to ease any tensions in the household. For other carers, the point at which they become grandparents can be pivotal, and for some people, they feel that their fostering responsibilities get in the way of the active role that they want to play in their grandchildren's lives. Again, the service actively works with carers in this situation, and explores alternatives in terms of their fostering in order to enable them to continue fostering, for example by becoming respite carers, sometimes this is successful and other times not.

5.11 From September 2019 there were 5 complaints about the Fostering Service. Two of these related to particular Supervising Social Workers and what was felt to be an over officious and oppressive approach to the foster carers. Two complaints related to financial matters which were

historical in nature and required a settlement, and the most recent one was a complaint from a cared for child in a placement, who found that the placement was not what he expected, and he wanted to move. The service generally responds to complaints within timescale and all these complaints have been dealt with at Stage 1 or are being dealt with at that stage.

Local Authority Designated Officer

5.12 There have been 5 involvements with the Local Authority Designated Officer over the last year. Two of these related to simultaneous allegations about two carers in the same household, and the others were allegations about single carers. The service has undertaken some work recently to consider how these processes might be improved and matters resolved in a timely way. As a result of this, clear timescales will be set at the outset which will give the Fostering Service a timeframe to work to and will give foster carers some reassurance about how long things will take. Doing this work was an important element in terms of the feedback from foster carers about this area being problematic and difficult for them, and it will provide carers with some reassurance that their concerns are being heard, taken seriously and acted upon.

Service Improvements

5.13 Corporate Parenting Committee members will be aware that in November 2019 Cheshire East Children's Services received our Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection undertaken by Ofsted. One of the recommendations from the inspection was to 'Improve the quality and consistency and support of our foster carers'. The need to focus on the development of our fostering service was also evidenced through engagement and consultation with our foster carers and members of staff across the fostering and wider services since last summer.

5.14 There is no more important function for a local authority than exercising our corporate parenting responsibility to ensure our cared for children and care leavers are well cared for and achieve good outcomes during their childhood and as they transition into adulthood.

5.15 Ofsted's judgement found that overall, we 'required improvement to be good' and made the following statements as part of their inspection report; *'Sufficiency of in-house foster carers is a known service challenge. The number of approved fostering households has reduced and recent attempts to improve recruitment has not had the impact that the Local Authority had hoped for. The quality of foster carer assessment is good. The IRO (Independent Reviewing Officer) for fostering is providing an*

effective level of challenge to ensure that carers continue to meet the standards for fostering. Foster Cares reported that they have access to a range of good training which supports them in caring for the children in their care'. In addition, the inspection report said that 'A significant group of foster carers have raised concerns over a period of time and during the inspection about the support they receive from the Local Authority. Inspectors found that foster carers were not always well supported and that, in some cases, working relationships were at risk of breaking down'.

- 5.16 Since then we have been working closely with our in-house foster carers and have made positive changes after listening to their views. We want to give our cared for children the very best opportunity to maintain their familial networks and live within their local communities.
- 5.17 We decided that we should commission an independent review of our fostering services. It is important to say that this did not solely focus on the work within the Fostering Service, but also included all aspects of the reach of fostering across the wider council and colleague network, including the work undertaken within our recruitment and marketing collaboration Foster 4.
- 5.18 The Independent Review of Fostering was undertaken by an expert in the field of Fostering and concluded that there was significant work needed to be undertaken across both the directorate and corporate levels to improve our approach and delivery of fostering services and support at Cheshire East Council.
- 5.19 Improvements must be made to the services that we deliver to children, young people, their families and foster carers to ensure that the outcomes for our cared for children and care leavers is improved. We must increase the number of in-house foster carers as this enables cared for children to remain closer to their familial environments, ensures that other networks (for example health provision and school) remains consistent. We must improve the experience of our existing foster carers and place the Local Authority on a sustainable financial footing concerning current and future placements costs. The acceptance of these recommendations will support the service to achieve this.
- 5.20 Our development journey since the Ofsted Inspection and independent fostering review has focussed on four specific areas, these are the:
- Strategic commissioning and corporate parenting functions for the service and for Cheshire East as a whole,
 - the recruitment and retention of foster carers,

- the Fostering Service structure and supervision
- and foster carers supervision and support.

Strategic Commissioning and Corporate Parenting

- 5.21 Exercising duties as a corporate parent should be at the forefront of thinking for officers, managers and elected members. As such we must guard against the dangers of creating a culture which suggests that corporate parenting is the sole preserve of social care or those employed in Children and Families.
- 5.22 Corporate Parenting is a duty which stretches across the Council and beyond to partner agencies who have a key role to play in ensuring the welfare needs of the whole child can be met. The Council's elected members have made a commitment as corporate parents to our Cared for children and care leavers through the 'Pledges' that were signed up to in December 2018
- 5.23 We would very much like to see this commitment expanded through the Council committing to be a 'Foster Friendly' employer. This would see the Council providing additional incentives to all of the foster carers who are directly employed by Cheshire East Council, for example, providing paid time off for these carers to attend 'Cared for Reviews', training, etc.
- 5.24 The Fostering Network have developed the Foster Friendly Employer programme and we are currently engaged with them in informal discussions concerning how we could introduce this in Cheshire East.
- 5.25 The numbers of children being cared for nationally has been increasing in recent years. Cheshire East Council has also experienced rising numbers of cared for children at the same time, our numbers of in-house foster carers have decreased, this has led to an increasing reliance on the use of placements with Independent Fostering Agencies.
- 5.26 The combined effect of this for Cheshire East Council, and most specifically for our care for children and young people, is likely to be detrimental to the best outcome for some cared for children. The range of placements used often necessitates placement further away from the child's home which causes subsequent discontinuity in education, healthcare and family contact. Furthermore, the increase in external foster placements incurs additional expenditure, as many external foster placements are approximately twice the cost of in-house foster care.

5.27 It is therefore critical that Cheshire East Council increases its number of in-house foster carers as this offers the best outcome for the child or young person. This enables them to remain closer to their familial networks and provides for the most efficient use of our resources, both in terms of staffing and fiscal management.

5.28 We are developing our own marketing and recruitment capability in-house to maximise our local foster carers. This is separate from the Foster 4 collaboration, which we will be leaving in September 2020.

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

5.29 We have already obtained a commitment from the Corporate Communications Team for a designated officer to work with us on our marketing, recruitment and communication. The officer identified had previously undertaken this role, prior to us joining Foster 4, and therefore has a wealth of knowledge and experience that is already proving to be invaluable.

5.30 We have already run two successful recruitment campaigns in the past few weeks via local radio and social media outlets and will continue to run campaigns alongside Foster 4 until September 2020.

5.31 We have streamlined the process for all new applicants that provides a swifter transition through to their approval, this has seen a reduction of the assessment process from 20 to 16 weeks.

5.32 Decisions on whether to proceed with an applicant are now made within 48 hours of the initial visit and the case is allocated for assessment at that point, with a date for Fostering Panel presentation set. Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the assessment process are being undertaken concurrently with checks, references and Skills to Foster training all forming component parts of assessment discussions.

5.33 The amended process for managing new prospective carers has required a cultural and managerial shift from current practice. In particular the practice of having to attend an Information Session and the Skills to Foster training prior to having an assessing social worker allocated has been discontinued.

5.34 We have recently approved 6 new Foster Carers using the new process with another 9 currently being assessed. This is the largest number of new Foster Carers and Foster Carers in assessment that we have seen in

the past couple of years and we hope that this is an indication of us 'turning the corner' in foster carers recruitment.

Fostering Service Structure and Supervision

5.35 The current structure of the Fostering Service in Cheshire East is unusual and presents some dilemmas and conflicts. It is acknowledged and accepted that the service has been subject to a high degree of change in recent years, not least in having numerous changes of manager.

5.36 There is a need for a degree of specialism within the Fostering Service beyond that supported by the current structure; the current structure creates potential conflicts and clashes when determining the relative priority of work tasks. For example, a court-imposed deadline may create a priority for a family and friends' assessment over and above an assessment for a mainstream foster carer.

5.37 Proposals are being developed to implement a service redesign and restructure. With the impending withdrawal from Foster 4 there will be a requirement to undertake additional activities within the service. The structure of the new service will see the establishment of a **Mainstream Recruitment and Assessment Team**, a **Mainstream Support and Supervision Team** that will incorporate our Children with Disabilities Short Break Carers, a **Connected Persons/ Special Guardianship Assessment and Support Team**, our **Mockingbird Team**, and a specialist **Post 18 Team** working with Care Leavers who remain in supported living, shared lives or staying put arrangements.

5.38 The development of the Fostering Service is being monitored through monthly Fostering Development Meetings which are chaired by the Director for Children's Social Care. In addition, the performance of the service has been added to the quarterly performance monitoring focussed meetings that are held as part of the Social Care Leadership Team Meetings.

Foster Carers Supervision and Support

5.39 Over the past few of months we have been working with a group of foster carers to develop a SharePoint site to enable them to directly access all the information and advice that they might need, for example; The Foster Carers' Handbook, policies and procedures (which are all being updated in co-production with another group of foster carers), training and events, support and resources (including payments, allowances and expense

claims), access to the Foster Carer Forum, our newsletter and other useful contacts.

- 5.40 As part of the Foster Carer Forums which have been reintroduced we have established several co-production groups with Foster Carers who expressed an interest to work on the development of services and support. This has included the Implementation Working Group for 'Mockingbird', working groups for policies and procedures, training and development, the newsletter and communications, and the fostering service steering group.
- 5.41 Cheshire East Council is one of very few Local Authorities who made a successful bid to the Department of Education to develop a Mockingbird programme. In excess of 60 Local Authorities applied to be part of the programme and we were one of the 5 successful applicants.
- 5.42 Cheshire East Council are working with the Department of Education and the Fostering Network to develop Mockingbird, which is an extended family model of delivering foster care through a central hub, which supports the role of several foster carers linked to the hub. We believe that this will strengthen support for those carers, and we hope will be an attractive incentive for part of our recruitment of new foster carers.
- 5.43 We will initially be developing two Mockingbird Hubs across Cheshire East; this will probably focus on the South and North localities. We have had a lead officer in place for some time and have been making significant progress in the development of the first Mockingbird Hub. We will be undertaking interviews for the 'Home Hub Carer' during the second week of September.
- 5.44 Our Mockingbird programme is linking with Bespoke, which is our new in-house residential and edge of care programme based within 4 new children's homes that are spread across the authority. The role of foster carers is crucial to support those children and young people currently living in residential care to return to family living, whether that be through returning to the care of their own parents or wider family or moving into foster care. We plan to recruit specialist foster carers to work directly with Bespoke.
- 5.45 A 12 month development plan is also in place, which is monitored through the Fostering Development Board, which meets monthly and is chaired by the Director of Childrens Social Care.

- 5.46 Cheshire East Council had not completed a fee increase for foster carers since 2015. A consultation exercise has just been completed with all of our current foster carers, who have overwhelmingly accepted the fee proposals that have been put forward and we have just implemented the fee increase. This act alone has done much to significantly improved the working relationship between us and our foster carers.
- 5.47 The service will be seeking feedback from foster carers via an annual questionnaire. In addition to this we have developed a fostering panel advice tracker, which amongst other things, contains details of the experience of foster carers through both the recruitment and assessment process and as part of the ongoing support offered to carers by the service and by children and young people's allocated social workers.
- 5.48 The service has also developed an information gathering process from the feedback received as part of the annual review for foster carers.
- 5.49 We are proud to support the Fostering Network's Foster Carer Charter which outlines the commitment we as a Council make to our Foster Carers and Children. It details the roles and responsibilities of the Corporate Parenting Board and the Fostering Service as well as the Foster Carers we support.
- 5.50 The Charter originated a number of years ago and has been updated to take account of developments within fostering and local government. Cheshire East is working hard to develop our Fostering Service and this Charter outlines some of our aspirations and goals for the next year to provide a service that everyone can be proud of.
- 5.51 In conjunction with our foster carers, Cheshire East will move forwards and provide children and young people with a positive experience of being cared for by our service and we are pleased to endorse the Charter.

6. Implications of the Recommendations

6.1. Legal Implications

- 6.1.1 Section 22G of the 1989 Children Act requires local authorities to take strategic action in respect of those children they look after and for whom it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation within their local authority area. In those circumstances, section 22G requires local authorities, so far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that there is sufficient

accommodation for those children that meets their needs and is within their local authority area.

6.2 Finance Implications

6.2.1 There are no direct financial implications of this report.

6.3 Policy Implications

6.3.1 Our Corporate Parenting Strategy states that we are committed to ensuring that our cared for children live locally in a good, safe homes.

6.4 Equality Implications

6.4.1 There are no specific equality implications contained with these recommendations.

6.5 Human Resources Implications

6.5.1 Redesign and restructure of the Fostering Service will have human resource implications as current members of staff will move into the newly created teams. This will require staff consultation. There are no planned job losses within the restructure.

6.6 Risk Management Implications

6.6.1 Regulatory Risks: The provision of sufficient and suitable foster placements is a key activity monitored by Ofsted during inspection, forming part of their judgement about services for cared for children.

6.6.2 Child Protection Risks: Failure to recruit or retain sufficient foster carers would be a child protection risk.

6.6.3 Reputational Risk: Recruitment of foster carers is a competitive market activity and has a high media profile.

6.6.4 Financial Risk: Cared for children placements is largely a demand led activity. A failure to recruit and retain sufficient in-house carers will result in overall increased expenditure on placements for cared for children with an overall higher unit cost. Independent

Agency Placements are high cost, and variations in the proportion of independent versus in-house placements can have significant and immediate impact on forecast spend.

6.7 Rural Communities Implications

6.7.1 Foster carers, as well as our cared for children and care leavers, live within all our communities, including our rural communities.

6.8 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children

6.8.1 It is essential that we recruit and retain a sufficient number and quality of in-house foster carers within Cheshire East to ensure as many of our cared for children as possible can live in a good family environment. This will ensure that these children can remain within their local networks, their local schools and continue to receive support services within our boundaries enabling them to feel safe, offering stability so that they can flourish and achieve their potential.

6.9 Public Health Implications

6.9.1 There are no direct policy implications relating to public health as a result of the recommendations within this report. However, increasing the life chances of our children and young people through fostering will improve the impact on the indices of health deprivation.

6.10 Climate Change Implications

6.10.1 Recruiting in-house foster carers will reduce our reliance on external foster agency carers, who almost always live outside of Cheshire East. Having in-house carers living within Cheshire East will reduce travel for social workers, other professionals involved with the child or young person and their Foster Carer and will therefore reduce the associated carbon footprint. Changing the requirement for foster carers to have a vehicle also has the potential to reduce our carbon footprint.

7 Ward Members Affected

7.1 Foster carers and cared for children and young people live in all wards and therefore all members will be affected. In addition, all members have

statutory responsibility as corporate parents for each one of our cared for children and young people.

8 Consultation & Engagement

- 8.1 Consultation or engagement has taken place with our current cohort of foster carers and will continue to do so as part of our Fostering Service Development Plan.
- 8.2 We have engaged with the other Local Authorities within the Foster 4 Collaboration (Cheshire West and Chester, Warrington and Halton).
- 8.3 We will enter into a consultation exercise with the current members of staff employed within the Fostering Service concerning the proposed redesign and restructure.

9 Access to Information

- 9.1 None.

10 Contact Information

- 10.1 Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

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