

BRIEFING REPORT

Corporate Parenting Committee

Date of Meeting:	15 March 2022
Report Title:	Mainstream Fostering Recruitment and Foster Care Fortnight Update Report
Report of:	Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report provides an update to committee on recruitment activity undertaken by the mainstream fostering service and plans to support Foster Care Fortnight in May 2022.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The report highlights the plans to proactively recruit more mainstream foster carers, activity which will take place in Foster Care Fortnight, and annual activity to raise awareness of, and recognise and support the valuable contribution of our foster carers.
- 2.2. This reports relates to pledge 3 of the Corporate Parenting Strategy: we will work to achieve permanence and keep children safe. The report highlights some of the work undertaken and progress made.
- 2.3. This report sets out related performance information regarding the recruitment activity, process and number of foster carers recruited in the last year between 1 April 2021 to 31 January 2022, and highlights how the Covid pandemic has impacted on recruitment during this time.

3. Background

- 3.1. The fostering service is responsible for discharging Cheshire East's statutory responsibilities and duties as a fostering agency. It is essential that that service meets its responsibilities to ensure sufficiency and availability of foster homes for cared for children and young people within Cheshire East.

- 3.2.** The fostering service in Cheshire East recruits, trains and supports mainstream foster carers and connected foster carers so that children and young people can be placed in high quality foster homes close to their family, friends, and school. It is a regulated service and is subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act 2000.
- 3.3.** Prior to October 2020, Cheshire East had been in a collaborative recruitment arrangement with three other local authorities called Foster 4. Following an independent review of the fostering service in January 2020, the decision was taken to leave Foster 4.
- 3.4.** The Covid pandemic delayed the plan to leave Foster 4 until the end of September 2020. On 1 October 2020 Cheshire East commenced recruitment under the 'Together for Fostering' branding which had been developed together with our own foster carers.
- 3.5.** Enquiry numbers did increase significantly following the separation; however, it soon became apparent that this would not be a normal year as the reality and practicalities of the Covid pandemic disrupted the usual rhythms of foster carer recruitment and appears to have impacted negatively on the conversion rate from people making enquiries then going on to make an application to foster.
- 3.6.** This was the case for most local authorities across the UK and for independent fostering agencies (IFAs) as many people felt they were not able to commit to becoming foster carers during the pandemic. Although on a positive note it became evident that many more people had begun to consider fostering as a new career.
- 3.7.** We plan to raise awareness of the valuable work that our foster carers do every day in caring for our most vulnerable children and young people, and increase our marketing and recruitment activity, during Foster Care Fortnight in May 2022.
- 3.8.** Foster Care Fortnight is the UK's biggest foster care awareness raising campaign, led by the fostering charity The Fostering Network. The campaign supports fostering services across the UK to highlight the need for more foster carers. It is supported by celebrities and politicians from across the UK. Thousands of new foster families are needed every year to care for children, with the greatest need being for foster carers for teenagers, sibling groups, disabled children, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 3.9.** Foster Care Fortnight will take place this year from 9 to 22 May 2022. The theme this year is 'fostering communities' and the campaign aims to shine a light on the many ways people across the fostering community have supported and continue to support each other - particularly over the last two years during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Briefing Information

- 4.1.** From 1 April 2021 to 31 January 2022 there has continued to be a lot of interest shown in mainstream fostering for the council. The new [fostering website](#) for Cheshire East, developed in conjunction with foster carers, has continued to gain a lot of visitors and to generate interest in fostering for the council. It is easily accessed from a mobile phone.
- 4.2.** The key challenge ahead is to achieve conversion from that initial interest of people enquiring about fostering, to identifying and safely recruiting people who have the necessary space in their home, motivation skills and attributes to become foster carers. That initial interest can take time to grow. Some research indicates this process can take anything from 18 months up to 5 years.
- 4.3.** Ofsted published their annual report - Fostering in England 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 - and it is heartening to note that this period saw more fostering households recorded than ever before (this included both local authority and independent fostering agencies (IFAs)). According to the Ofsted report, 160,635 initial enquiries were made during 2020-21, which was the highest number ever (a 55% increase since 2014-15 – the 2014 to 2015 year represented a high point of foster care activity) however 79% of these enquiries were made with IFAs. It was noted however that the conversion ratio of enquiries to applications was conversely at the lowest level on record at 16 enquiries to 1 application, for 2014-15 there were 8 enquiries to 1 application.
- 4.4.** Since 1 April 2021 to 31 January 2022 there have been 177 initial enquiries received by the fostering service in Cheshire East which have resulted in 30 initial visits. Last year, for the whole year between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, there were 181 initial enquiries and 63 initial visits.
- 4.5.** Since 1 April 2021 to 31 January 2022, 10 new mainstream fostering households were approved which have provided 13-15 homes for children and young people, dependent on the numbers of siblings that can be placed who are able to share a bedroom. Last year, 15 new mainstream households were approved which provided 23 homes for children.
- 4.6.** Cheshire East currently has a total of 160 approved mainstream and short breaks foster carers comprising of 95 households. However this is not sufficient to meet the current demand for foster homes. As of 28 January 2022, 53% (135) children and young people from Cheshire East were placed with independent fostering agency foster carers compared to 47% (121) children and young people placed with in-house mainstream foster carers.
- 4.7.** Our ambition is to shift the balance so that we move towards a more sustainable split of 60% of children and young people being placed with Cheshire East foster carers and 40% being commissioned via independent

fostering agencies. This will require a corresponding increase in marketing and recruitment activity to compete with the IFAs which has been included within our recruitment strategy.

- 4.8.** Recruitment activity within the Covid pandemic has continued to be challenging, however, we have continued to achieve success via the website with a high number of people visiting and spending time reading the information.
- 4.9.** We have continued to work with the Marketing and Communications Team to develop a new brand identity and deliver ongoing campaigns that we are confident will increase the number of applications from people to become a local authority foster carer in Cheshire East.
- 4.10.** The key strategic communications objectives are:
- to improve local foster care placement choice and stability for children and young people in Cheshire East, particularly for teenagers and children requiring short break care
 - to increase the number of in-house foster placements and reduce the use of independent fostering agencies (IFAs) and residential care
 - our target is to recruit at least 20-30 additional foster carers annually
 - we will work more closely with commercial companies, partners, community groups and key stakeholder groups to showcase the value foster carers provide to our community
 - we hope that the council and other large organisations will commit to becoming a fostering friendly employer in 2022/23 to further encourage and promote more people to become foster carers.
- 4.11.** We have strategically placed banners at a range of schools across Cheshire East to raise awareness and attract parents, carers, and school staff to foster. In addition, we have supported the Marketing and Communications Team to increase social media activity and to initiate the successful winter recruitment campaign based on the 'Wish for you the world' campaign and video, which has generated a lot of interest in fostering for Cheshire East.
- 4.12.** At the time of writing, there is no obvious sign that the usual patterns of enquiries and recruitment will re-emerge imminently however we have plans to step up our activity over the forthcoming months as Covid restrictions are lifted. As people's personal situations change, we hope to see some of the people who made enquiries in 2020-2021 start to return to seriously considering a career in fostering.
- 4.13.** We continue to be proactive in recruiting suitable carers and ensure that anyone who does make an enquiry receives a comprehensive information

booklet and has a conversation with a knowledgeable staff member who can answer any questions and arrange for an initial visit to take place.

- 4.14.** We have also offered monthly virtual drop-in sessions for those interested in fostering but who want to know more before they submit an enquiry. We will continue to provide these sessions with additional face to face sessions being planned from March 2022.
- 4.15.** In July and August 2021 we attended the Cheshire Show and Geronimo Festival to raise awareness of fostering and generate interest, covering four full days in total. These events were 'staffed' by a mix of fostering service staff, foster carers and some representation from the wider children's service (19 staff and 3 foster carers in total). Details were taken from 23 people/ households across these four days, however, on further follow up there was a mixed response, and to date those enquiries resulted in progression to just one initial visit.
- 4.16.** Additional activity took place within the Virtual Pride event whereby a fostering couple from the LGBTQA+ community talked about fostering for the council. Five children's services staff also ran the Congleton half marathon while promoting the fostering service with a photo opportunity prior to the race while wearing our promotional T-shirts.
- 4.17.** Staff and foster carers have also taken fostering leaflets to a range of community and sporting venues that they and their families attend. A timetable of events for 2022 is currently being planned, and within this it is anticipated that a wider range of events can now be considered and attended as Covid restrictions are lifted which will result in a better response rate. For example we have booked a stall at two events to celebrate International Women's Day on 5 and 19 March 2022.
- 4.18.** A working group will be established to deliver the plan for increased activity to promote fostering during Foster Care Fortnight. The Recruitment Champions Group, consisting of foster carers willing to share their ideas about how best to recruit more foster carers and to help us when we attend events and information evenings throughout 2022/23, will also be re-established.
- 4.19.** We are working with the Fostering Network to celebrate the success of the Mockingbird constellations following the launch of our second Mockingbird constellation on 24 January 2022 and to publicise the success of this family orientated 'hub and spoke' model of fostering.
- 4.20.** We are working with colleagues in the Marketing and Communications Team on launching a fresh campaign for Foster Care Fortnight to launch our new 'BE THERE' campaign and to consolidate our targeted recruitment to attract

more foster carers who can offer home to sibling groups, teenagers, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

- 4.21.** Updates and events will be published on our website and the Marketing and Communications Team have made a commitment to send out messages via social media every 2-3 days to raise awareness of the crucial role our foster carers have in providing permanence and stability to some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

5. Implications

5.1. Legal

- 5.1.1.** This report demonstrates the council's adherence to its obligations under the Fostering National Minimum Standards. Legal advice will be sought, as appropriate, upon all relevant emerging issues.

5.2. Finance

- 5.2.1.** There are no financial implications of this report. In-house fostering is one of the most cost effective options for the council.

5.3. Human Resources

- 5.3.1.** Changes to working arrangements as a result of the pandemic are outlined in the reports.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Alison Talheth Alison.Talheth@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	None