



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

Cheshire East Fostering Service Annual Report

April 2024– March 2025



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1. Background

This report provides an overview of the work of Cheshire East Council Fostering Service, during the financial year April 2024 to March 2025. The report provides information on our work as a fostering service, including the kinship service, mockingbird and in-house placement service. The report aims to give an overview of the last 12 months and recommendations for the coming year ahead.

2. Overview

Cheshire East is a well-established, dynamic local authority fostering service, offering a comprehensive range of services, from the recruitment and assessment of mainstream foster carers to the evaluation, training, support, and supervision of family and friends (kinship) carers. The fostering service has offices in Crewe and Macclesfield, though most staff maintain a flexible working arrangement, with a mix of 50% office-based presence and 50% remote work. The service operates across the entire Cheshire East area, covering a large geographic region.

The fostering service recruits, trains, and supports both mainstream and kinship carers, ensuring that children and young people are placed in high-quality foster homes near their family, friends, and schools. It is a regulated service, subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act 2000. Our goal is to provide stable, high-quality internal placements for children, with carers who can meet their needs and receive ongoing support, supervision, and training.

Our service is built on strong relationships between foster carers, children, and social workers. We actively work in partnership with foster carers, ensuring they have a voice in the development of the service. This year, we have continued to make strides in enhancing our consultations with foster carers and improving their involvement in service development through a number of groups and walk and talk sessions.

Where possible, we aim to support children within their own families by providing the necessary services to keep them safe. When this is not feasible, children are placed with extended family members as kinship carers in their community, whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so.

The Head of Service is responsible for the strategic direction of the fostering service, including overseeing the Fostering Service Manager and is the Agency Decision Maker. The Fostering Service Manager ensures that the service complies with statutory duties and meets the National Minimum Standards (NMS) and Fostering Regulations. These standards, together with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, form the regulatory framework for fostering services under the Care Standards Act 2000.

3. Foster4



In May 2024, Cheshire East Council partnered with seven other local authorities, Cheshire West and Chester, Warrington, Liverpool, Knowsley, Halton, St. Helens, and Wirral, under the Foster4 initiative. This pioneering regional recruitment strategy highlights a strong commitment to ensuring

that children from Cheshire East are placed with carers from within Cheshire and neighboring areas. It also emphasises the importance of working together to support cared for children, ensuring they stay within their local authority, rather than moving to independent fostering agencies. Keeping children within Cheshire helps achieve key goals, such as maintaining strong ties with their birth families, allowing children to stay at their current school, and ensuring they remain connected to their community. After completing the first year of this collaboration, we are starting to see significant improvements in fostering referrals.

4. Staff Overview

The fostering service is supported by the Head of Service for Children's Provision alongside the Service Manager who is the operational lead alongside four Team Managers. The team operates across a broad remit, with key areas of focus including mainstream and kinship assessments, marketing and recruitment, the Mockingbird programme, fostering panel coordination and advice, carer support and supervision, training and development, placement matching, and out-of-hours support, which is delivered through our dedicated Family Support Workers.

Administrative and logistical support is provided by our Unit Coordinators, who are responsible for tasks such as taking minutes at panel meetings and managing email and telephone communications.

Of the 42 team members, 10 are currently agency staff. However, one agency Team Manager has recently been appointed to a permanent role following a successful recruitment process. Over the past year, there has been an increased reliance on agency staff due to maternity leave cover and staff sickness. Additionally, the volume of kinship care work, much of it driven by court-directed timescales, has grown substantially, prompting an expansion in staffing establishment to meet demand.

The team brings a wealth of professional experience and demonstrates strong commitment and passion in supporting children, carers, and families.

Looking ahead, the service will prioritise strengthening the Team Manager role to ensure consistent leadership and enhanced support for the Service Manager. There is also a focus on securing specialist training to promote staff resilience and enhance performance management across the service.

There also needs to be on-going conversations around the growth on the kinship work, to meet demand. To try and proactively address this, we have merged the mainstream and kinship assessors to enable them to be multiskilled and create one team. Whilst the team will have their specialisms, the creation of one assessment team, aims to share court directed work more fairly and ensure caseloads remain manageable.

5. Cared for Children data

At the end of the 2024/25-year Cheshire East had 550 cared for children. During the year this has been as low as 526 and as high as 562, however has generally remain quite stable.

Month	Number		Age Band	28-Mar
Apr-24	528		0 to 4	114
May-24	526		5 to 10	131

Jun-24	534		11 to 15	184
Jul-24	545		16+	121
Aug-24	540		TOTAL	550
Sep-24	556			
Oct-24	556			
Nov-24	562			
Dec-24	547			
Jan-25	547			
Feb-25	547			
Mar-25	550			

Of the 550 children at the end of March 2025, 235 (66.19%) children were placed with Cheshire East Foster Carers either through mainstream carers or kinship carers, compared with 119 children placed with Independent Foster Carers (IFAs).

Placement Type	0 to 4	5 to 10	11 to 15	16+	Total 31/03/25
Relative/Friend	23	21	21	6	71
CE Foster Care	32	31	37	20	120
External Foster Care (IFA)	18	30	51	20	119
Regulation 24 placement (going through assessment process)	7	18	15	4	44

The number of children who are long term matched with their foster carers is as follows:

Long term Matched	Number	%
CE Foster Care	33	28%
Family & Friends Foster Care	52	73%
External Foster Care	31	26%

We know that by placing children with Cheshire East mainstream carers or with kinship carers increases the chance of children remaining within the borough and enables them to continue to be apart of their communities, with better outcomes. Of the 354 (52.26%) children placed within foster care, 185 children remain within Cheshire East in in-house provision, compared with 31 (8.75%) children placed with IFAs demonstrating

Placement Type	IN	OUT	Total
Relative/Friend	54	17	71
CE Foster Care	104	16	120
External Foster Care	31	88	119
Regulation 24 placement	27	17	44

The Ethnicity of our cared for children:

Ethnicity	0 to 4	5 to 10	11 to 15	16+	Total
White British	101	109	142	77	429
White Other	4	4	13	5	26
Any other asian background	0	1	3	10	14
Pakistani	0	1	0	0	1
African	0	0	2	9	11
Black Caribbean	0	1	0	1	2
Any other black background	0	0	0	1	1
Chinese	0	1	0	1	2
Other Mixed Background	3	5	5	2	15
White asian	1	2	5	1	9
White & Black African	0	0	1	2	3
White and Black Caribbean	0	2	4	2	8
Information Not Yet Obtained	1	1	0	0	2
Other Ethnic group	0	0	4	6	10
Bangladeshi	1	1	0	1	3
Traveller of Irish Heritage	0	0	0	1	1
Gypsy / Roma	2	2	4	1	9
Indian	1	1	1	1	4
Total	114	131	184	121	550

6. Foster Carer Recruitment, Reviews and Resignations

During the last year the service has successfully recruited 45 new carers to our fostering service. The types of carers recruited and registered were 10 new foster carers within our mainstream provision, 35 new kinship carers.

Year to date summary Mainstream

Foster carers:

<i>Conversion to EOI</i>	23.86%
<i>Conversion to Initial Visit</i>	12.18%
<i>Conversion to Assessment</i>	13.71%
<i>Conversion to Approval</i>	5.08%

These figures represent a **50%** increase in respect of mainstream fostering approvals compared to the previous year, however the increase is not as much as the service would have liked, this is **in-line** with the experience of other Local Authorities and assessed as being linked to the cost-of-living crisis. Whilst the rate of recruitment and registration of new mainstream foster carers has increased, we have had some deregistration of carers throughout the year. Over the course of the year there were a total of 40 foster carers deregistered (mainstream 13 and kinship 27) due to varying reasons which are summarised below, which then only gives a net gain of 5 fostering households.

The Fostering Panel is critical to the business of the Fostering Service and is a legal requirement. The Panel meets approximately three times per month to consider panel business. Our Independent Fostering Panel Chair, Reshma Kodampur took over responsibility for chairing the Panel in January 2022 and remains in this role. The Panel is assisted by the interim Panel Advisor, who is employed via an agency by Cheshire East. The service and Panel advisor undertakes the gatekeeping function for Panel to ensure that all matters placed before Panel meet the necessary minimum regulatory requirements. The panel advisor has experience of chairing other local authority panels and independent fostering agencies (IFAs) and brings that experience and knowledge to the role.

There is also a vice chair of panel who takes the chair when the usual panel chair is unavailable for some reason. The central list consists of a further eight panel members aside from the chair and vice chair. The panel advisor does not sit as a voting panel member, his role is to provide advice to panel and to the service.

Cases presented to Panel 2024-2025:

Case Type	Total Presented	Positive Recommendation	Recommended Case be Deferred	Negative Recommendation
Mainstream Assessments	10	10	0	0
Kinship Carers Assessments	39	33 (ADM deferred	4	2

		1 assessment)		
Mainstream Reviews	17	14	3	0
Kinship Carers Reviews	21	21	0	0
Foster to Adopt Reviews	1	1	0	0
Regulation 25 Extension Requests	34	34	0	0
Long Term Matches	3	3	0	0
Mainstream Resignations	13			
Connected Carers Resignations	27			
Foster to Adopt Resignations	5			
TOTAL CASES	167	116	7	2

Mainstream Assessments

- 8 x New applications through Foster4
- 2 x IFA transfers
- 4 x Assessments presented within timescales
- 5 x Assessments presented out of timescales due to delays on checks with partners such as Medical checks and DBS checks.

Kinship Carers Assessments

- 1 x Negative recommendation
- 1 x Brief report also presented to panel
- 1 x Assessment deferred by ADM
- 14 x Assessments presented within timescales
- 10 x Assessments presented out of timescales, due to delays in checks and also a lack of staff allocated to the kinship team
- 2 x Assessments ADM did not agree with panel's recommendation of unsuitable to foster and therefore approved the Foster Carers
- 1 x Assessment ADM did not agree with panel's recommendation of negative decision and deferred their decision, upheld item through a Regulation 25 extension
- 1 x Assessment ADM did not agree with panel's recommendation of positive decision and deferred their decision for further work

Mainstream Reviews (completed by the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer FIRO)

- 14 positive reviews consisted of:
 - 3 x Change of registration
 - 3 x LADO
 - 7 x First review
 - 1 x Agency concerns
- 1 x Reviews presented within timescales
- 5 x Reviews presented out of timescales
- 8 x No details if reviews within/out of timescales due to a change in the LCS system

Kinship Carers Reviews (completed by the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer FIRO)

- 21 positive reviews consisted of:
 - 1 x Agency concerns
 - 16 x First reviews
 - 4 x Change of registration
- 7 x Reviews presented within timescales
- 6 x Reviews presented out of timescales
- 8 x No details if reviews within/out of timescales

Foster to Adopt Review (completed by the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer FIRO)

- 1 positive review consisted of:
 - 1 x First review
- 1 x Reviews presented out of timescales

Long Term Matches

- 3 x IFA foster carers
- 3 x Children long term matched with 3 foster families

Mainstream Resignations

- 13 resignations consisted of:
 - 2 x Transferred to IFA
 - 3 x Personal circumstances
 - 3 x Foster carer retired
 - 3 x Young person turned 18 years old
 - 2 x 'Staying Put' placements

Connected Carers Resignations

- 27 resignations consisted of:
 - 14 x Special Guardianship Orders granted, which is extremely positive
 - 2 x Placement breakdowns
 - 4 x Children returned to birth parents, which is supportive of our work with the cared for children's service
 - 1 x Young person turned 18 years old
 - 2 x Young person moved to independent living
 - 2 x Personal circumstances of the carers changed
 - 2 x 'Staying Put' placements, which is again very positive

Foster to Adopt Resignations

- 5 resignations consisted of:
 - 5 x Adoption orders, granted which is extremely positive for permanency

De-registrations

- 1 x Kinship carer was de-registered
- 2 x Mainstream carers de-registered (1 x mainstream appealed to the IRM, but the Local ADMs decision was upheld in support of deregistration)

Brief Report that came to Panel

- 1 x Kinship carer

Number of Fostering Panels for Period April 2024 to March 2025

- 35 panels took place consisting of:
 - 28 x Virtually through Microsoft Teams
 - 7 x In person

Number of Development Days in Period April 2024 to March 2025

- 3 development days took place with the Fostering Service and Panel member dates were: 18th June 2024, 20th September 2024 and 05th February 2025. This highlights a continued commitment to improving our relationship with panel and working together to improve the overall process for our Foster Carers.

7. Recruitment and Marketing

Recruitment for 2024-2025 has been conducted primarily through Foster4, with a joint launch of the collaborative taking place at Chester Zoo in May 2024.

Since then, we have engaged in a wide range of marketing and engagement events including attending makers markets, pop-up stalls, gyms and supermarket presence, social media campaigns and also been involved with a new marketing video to raise awareness of the amazing work foster carers do.



BENEFITS

Being a Foster Carer is hugely rewarding on many levels, but it also takes lots of practical provision to make it possible. We are very proud of the role our foster carers play and in recognition of this we provide an extensive package of benefits and rewards.

We offer:



A professional fee for your time, skill and hard work dedicated to fostering plus a generous fostering allowance, to cover the cost of looking after a child.



Baby equipment for those foster carers caring for a baby/toddler.



A holiday, birthday, religious celebration allowance for each foster child based on their age.



A £500 bonus for every friend you refer to fostering, who is approved to foster.



Access for new carers to apply for the Guaranteed Income Scheme for the first 6 months in a 12-month period.



Free membership to the Fostering Network which gives discounts to legal expenses, mortgages, holidays, and family days out.



A leisure pass for 'Everyday Leisure' which can be used by foster children and all the foster family to access swimming, gym, and classes.



Annual events to recognise and support the foster carer role, including Family Fun days, festive celebrations, and long service awards.

Our current Foster Carer Offer includes:

- A professional fee for your time, skill and hard work dedicated to fostering plus a generous fostering allowance, to cover the cost of looking after a child.
- A holiday, birthday, religious celebration allowance for each foster child based on their age
- Baby equipment for those foster carers caring for a baby/toddler.
- A £500 bonus for every friend you refer to fostering, who is approved to foster.
- Access for new carers to apply for the Guaranteed Income Scheme for the first 6 months in a 12-month period

- Free membership to the Fostering Network which gives discounts to legal expenses, mortgages, holidays, and family days out
- A leisure pass for 'Everyday Leisure' which can be used by foster children and all the foster family to access swimming, gym, and classes.
- Annual events to recognise and support the foster carer role, including Family Fun days, festive celebrations, and long service awards
- Annual children celebration event 'Star Awards' to recognise the achievements our 'cared for' children make.
- Access to apply for the Fostering Capacity Scheme whereby foster carers can apply for a loan or grant to increase the capacity to offer more placements for children, by adapting their property
- Regular events and support groups for children of foster carers.
- Free or discounted tickets for family activities to make days out fun and accessible.
- Paid respite leave.

Foster4 data on recruitment:

Monthly Data												
	Apr-24	May-24	Jun-24	Jul-24	Aug-24	Sep-24	Oct-24	Nov-24	Dec-24	Jan-25	Feb-25	Mar-25
Number of Enquiries	9	18	14	15	16	20	20	15	8	24	18	20
Number of EOIs completed	2	3	8	3	5	3	4	4	5	4	3	3
Number of Initial Visits	0	1	1	3	3	3	1	0	3	4	3	2
Number of Assessments Started	0	0	1	1	2	3	2	4	2	5	4	3
Number of Approvals	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	2	1
Year to date Data												
	Apr-24	May-24	Jun-24	Jul-24	Aug-24	Sep-24	Oct-24	Nov-24	Dec-24	Jan-25	Feb-25	Mar-25
Enquiries YTD	9	27	41	56	72	92	112	127	135	159	177	197
EOIs YTD	2	5	13	16	21	24	28	32	37	41	44	47
IVs YTD	0	1	2	5	8	11	12	12	15	19	22	24
Assessments Started YTD	0	0	1	2	4	7	9	13	15	20	24	27
Approvals YTD	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	7	9	10
YTD Enquiry to EOI conversion	22.22%	18.52%	31.71%	28.57%	29.17%	26.09%	25.00%	25.20%	27.41%	25.79%	24.86%	23.86%
YTD Enquiry to IV conversion	0.00%	3.70%	4.88%	8.93%	11.11%	11.96%	10.71%	9.45%	11.11%	11.95%	12.43%	12.18%
YTD Enquiry to Assessment conversion	0.00%	0.00%	2.44%	3.57%	5.56%	7.61%	8.04%	10.24%	11.11%	12.58%	13.56%	13.71%
YTD Enquiry to Approval conversion	22.22%	11.11%	7.32%	7.14%	5.56%	4.35%	3.57%	3.94%	3.70%	4.40%	5.08%	5.08%

The data demonstrates that whilst enquires are high, conversation rates are not where we would like them to be, however these do reflect the 7 other LA's conversion rates. This has led us as a wider collective, to look at how we can attract the right carers and raised more awareness about the different types of foster care available e.g. weekend carers, emergency carers, mother and baby foster carers.

During 2024-2025 Foster4 has launched a new Fostering Recruitment Strategy. There are 4 main strands on the fostering recruitment strategy, which are:

1. Communications, Marketing and Campaigns
2. Partnerships and Engagement
3. Improving our offer of retention and support to existing foster carers
4. Changing the way, we work

These four strands all have their own dedicated workstream established and representatives from each local authority, Workforce Development, Cheshire East Foster Friendly are all involved, as well as Team Managers, external consultants and Supervising Social Workers. Plans are being made to also include our foster carers as part of this work to ensure their voices shape the future of the service. At present there is lots of work taking place by our corporate comms & marketing team, the fostering service and other services to support this key priority to recruit and retain foster carers.

Foster4 were successful in recruiting a family support worker that is allocated to Cheshire East, which is being jointly managed by the fostering service and Foster4 leads 'Warrington'. This post supports the activity above and the general recruitment and retention of foster carers. We have also refreshed and relaunch the Cheshire East website to ensure all enquires are redirected to the Foster4 website.

The fostering team has day to day responsibility for the website so can update it on a regular basis with news and events. The website promotes the benefits of becoming a foster carer and share detailed information about different types of fostering. The website includes a new focus on enrichment and retention activity. It will also host a 'blog/news' section where we can share more informal information e.g. interviews with foster carers and highlight specific events and activity such as the launch of new schemes. Foster4 website includes a refreshed 'Expression of Interest' form, which simplifies the process for prospective foster carers. The website and the form also have better data analysis functionality, which we hope to capitalise on in 2025-2026.

Additionally, Foster4 social media strategy ensures that free/organic posts can be as effective as possible to increase brand awareness and encourage people to take the first steps to consider becoming a foster carer. In order to reach a wider audience with the message about the urgent need for new foster carers in Cheshire East we are working towards engaging new ambassadors to be part of our Fostering Friendly campaign. We have developed a communications toolkit, which can be shared with partner agencies for them to feature adverts and communications within their own newsletters, social media posts and throughout their networks. Outside of this work there will be a renewed focus on who we target and approach to become foster carers areas.

Another area of focus for the coming year will be to try and attract more diverse foster carers, to meet the diverse needs of our cared for children. We recognise that children from ethnically diverse communities in foster homes are not always culturally matched, and we need more carers from these same groups of people to meet their needs. With that in mind we have developed a two-pronged approach that will be a clear focus in 2025/26. We will be working in conjunction with Foster4, elected members and the Fostering Recruitment Team to hold an ambassadors event targeting community groups and partners with good links to a range of diverse communities in order to support us to recruit more foster carers of diverse ethnicities.

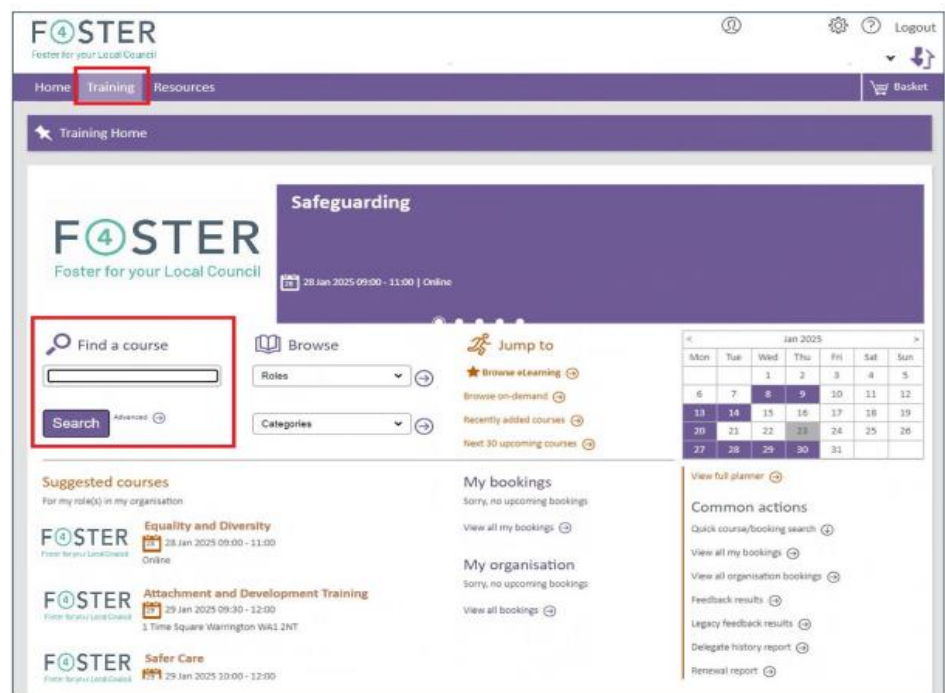
8. Training

All foster carers are required to adhere to the National Minimum Standards for Foster Care 2011. When designing and creating our training offer, we prioritise and consider these and ensure we support and work alongside these to give our foster carers a more holistic approach. All foster carers are required to complete a training, support and development standards (TSD) portfolio. This is to be completed within 12 months for mainstream carers and within 18 months for kinship carers. We want to ensure our foster carers have the skills for their role and they can demonstrate this in their TSD portfolio by connecting the dots of the training and the portfolio, this will give foster carers a more holistic view of their learning and skills together as one.

Throughout the year a blended approach to learning and development has continued, with offers of face-to-face sessions and virtual sessions for foster carers. The service has continued to run the foster care training calendar throughout the year with a range of learning and development opportunities to support the skills, knowledge, and confidence of carers.

Moving forward for 2025-2026 our training offer has become more diverse and accessible through our collaborative approach with Foster4 and a new digital app.

After consultation with foster carers across the 8 local authorities, feedback has been collated to design a training framework that will support foster carers by providing them with the skills, knowledge and training to successfully care for our most vulnerable children as an approved foster carer. Up until 2024, all foster carer training was being delivered at a local level. We all felt this posed a risk of potential inconsistent training for foster carers across the



Foster4 collaboration. By designing a framework for all foster carers across our various local authorities, it allows foster carers to have consistent and more accessible of training. The new app is extremely accessible and gives greater data and insight into effectiveness, which we hope will strengthen our support to foster carers in the coming year.

This framework outlines the expectations for foster carers and their learning pathways. This includes:

- Pre-Approval Training Guidelines
- Post-Approval Mandatory Training
- Carer Development Training

It allows foster carers to look at the full 'picture' when it comes to their learning pathway and the expectations for foster carers. We have outlined which National Minimum Standards 2011 and Training, Support and Development Standards (TSD) underpin the framework allowing foster carers to build a bigger picture and relate the training back to their portfolio work, rather than these existing as 2 separate entities.

THE FOSTER4 LEARNING FRAMEWORK

What does our training cover and what underpins it?

Our next section outlines the type of training (mandatory etc), what the course name is and what standards underpin to form our learning objectives and outcomes for each course.

We take a holistic approach looking at the standards that foster carers need to consider and how these play a part in the learning pathway. Each learner will be able to attend the course and be able to link it back to the requirements and paperwork they will be completing alongside their training. This gives a more joined-up approach to training and development.

All foster carers are required to adhere to the **National Minimum Standards for Foster Care 2011**. When designing and creating our training offer, we prioritise and consider these and ensure we support and work alongside these to give our foster carers a more holistic approach.

All foster carers are required to complete a **training, support and development standards (TSD)** portfolio. This is to be completed within 12 months for mainstream carers and within 18 months for kinship carers. We want to ensure our foster carers have the skills for their role and they can demonstrate this in their TSD portfolio by connecting the dots of the training and the portfolio, this will give foster carers a more holistic view of their learning and skills together as one.



Face to Face/Virtual Training

Time / Delivery	Course	Booked	Attended
Daytime Evening Virtual	Tax workshop	7	7
Daytime Virtual	Family time	20	18
Daytime Face 2 Face	Safer caring, recording skills, confidentiality & data protection	13	10
Daytime Virtual	Emotionally based school avoidance	13	13
Daytime Face 2 Face	Alternative provisions & transition timetables	10	10
Daytime Face 2 Face	Team teach de-escalation	14	10
Daytime Face 2 Face	Contextual safeguarding	15	12
Daytime Virtual	Equality & diversity	15	13
Daytime Virtual	ADHD & Conduct disorders	16	13
Daytime Virtual	Childhood bereavement	10	6
Daytime Virtual	SIDS & Safe sleep	33	33
Daytime Face 2 Face	Recording skills, confidentiality, data protection & managing allegations	10	6
Daytime Virtual	Phonics & early reading	Cancelled by facilitator	
Evening Virtual	Equality & diversity	24	19

Daytime Face 2 Face	Phonics & early reading	13	9
Daytime Face 2 Face	Drug & alcohol awareness	Cancelled due to low attendance	
Daytime Face 2 Face	Safer caring, recording skills, confidentiality & data protection	Cancelled by service	Cancelled by service
to Face	Blue Cross- Foster Children and Pets	13	10
Face to Face	Help to Reach my Teenager	20	11
Virtual	Tax and Finance	Cancelled due to low attendance	
Face to Face	De-escalation (2 day course) x2	16 20	4 13
Virtual	Gambling Bet You Can Help	9	8
Face to Face/Virtual	Contextual Safeguarding x2	19	13
Virtual	Post 16 Options and Transitions	12	12
Virtual	Mental Health and Wellbeing	16	12
Virtual	Food in Care	Course cancelled due to low attendance	
Virtual	Caring for Traumatised Babies and Toddlers	25	17
Virtual	Preparing for Exams	5	5

Virtual	Therapeutic Parenting (6-week course)	13	13
Daytime Virtual	Therapeutic parenting Module 1 – Attachment & training Module 2 – Blocking & miscuing Module 3 – The importance of emotional attunement Module 4 – All behaviour is communication Module 5 – Understanding attachment history Module 6 – Blocked care & safe care	20	15
Daytime Virtual	Mindfulness Session 1 – Introduction Session 2 – My breath, my body Session 3 – Finding your touch stone Session 4 – Mindful movement Session 5 – A psychology of life Session 6 – Attitude, mind the gap Session 7 – Finding insight Session 8 – Our whole journey to mindful life	Cancelled due to low attendance	
Total to date			312

Promoting Training and Increasing Participation

While we acknowledge that uptake and participation in training remains an area for improvement, we are confident that the introduction of the new Foster4 portal will enhance accessibility and engagement. To support this, we will implement a targeted communication strategy to promote the benefits of training, including how it supports carers in their roles and contributes to positive outcomes for children.

9. Fostering Family Events and Community Engagement

Throughout the year, we have continued to organise a wide range of events and activities for fostering families, with a particular focus on providing enriching experiences during school holidays. These activities have included Ninja sessions, Easter crafts, pottery painting, golf, kickboxing, rollerblading, science workshops, and visits to Flip Out, among others. Our events are thoughtfully designed to cater to different groups—ranging from activities exclusively for children and young people, to family fun days, and dedicated events for foster carers and their birth or adopted children.

One of the highlights of the year was our annual BBQ at Tatton Park, which remains a firm favourite among our fostering families. In addition to our own events, we have strengthened partnerships with local organisations to offer educational visits and experiences, all provided free of charge to our families.

We are also fortunate to receive generous donations from theme parks, with over £10,000 worth of complimentary tickets distributed throughout the year. These included tickets to Alton Towers, Cadbury World, and LEGOLAND Manchester, offering memorable days out for our carers and children.

We concluded the year with our much-anticipated Christmas celebration at Sandhole Oak Barn, kindly provided to us free of charge. This festive event brought together over 100 attendees and served as a heartfelt celebration of our foster carers. We recognised long-standing carers with awards and flowers, and were pleased to be joined by Councillor Bulman and Councillor Gillman in acknowledging the dedication and impact of our fostering community.

Support groups for foster carers:

Across the city (Crewe, Macclesfield, Alsager, Nantwich, Middlewich, Congleton, Breton) there are walk and talk support groups, these run on a monthly basis and include support groups for kinship carers, foster carers who care for teenagers, those who support unaccompanied asylum seeking children, parent and child foster carers, , foster carers who care for babies with neonatal abstinence syndrome and carers who care for children with disabilities, Each support group has a representative from the service and foster carers. Foster carer representatives play a key stakeholder role and are involved in a range of service developments. In addition, the service runs a monthly Stay and Play, and coffee and cake support group. The managers also run a monthly drop in across Cheshire East hubs “meet the manager” for foster carers, using this as an opportunity to raise any concerns they may have. In the next financial year, we will be adding a reflective ‘chit chat’ group for foster carers, and a crèche for under 5’s is provided.

10. Kinship Care and Special Guardianship

As of this year, Cheshire East has 85 approved kinship households providing care for 115 children. This represents an increase in the number of children supported through kinship arrangements compared to the previous year. Approximately 13% of our cared-for children are placed with kinship carers—a proportion that has grown and remains consistent with previous

years. Notably, 41 children were placed under Regulation 24 procedures, marking a 37% increase from the previous year.

This sustained and growing use of kinship care is a positive development. It enables children to remain within their extended families and communities, supporting their identity, cultural continuity, and emotional wellbeing. It also helps to alleviate some of the pressures caused by the ongoing national shortage of foster carers.

During the Regulation 24 temporary approval period, kinship placements can be fragile and often require tailored support. Our Kinship Assessment Team continues to provide this support, helping carers navigate the complexities of the assessment process and better meet the needs of the children in their care.

Children living with family and friends under Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) continue to receive support through our dedicated post-SGO service within Early Help. The Special Guardianship Team offers clear and structured support plans, and therapeutic services are available to both children and their carers.

11. The Mockingbird Family Model

This year the Fostering Service are pleased to share that we have increased our Mockingbird constellations from 2 to 3.

The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) places an emphasis on building links between fostering families and the wider community. The emphasis is very much about strengthening families and protecting children and young people. The model is evidencing effective support for satellite carers and assisting with placement stability for children and young people.

In total 24 fostering households are being supported with a total of 82 children and young people (this is within 3 hubs). Of the 24 Fostering families involved in MFM - 18 of those families were reported to be under stress or at risk of breakdown (at some point in the year) without the support of the MFM Hub Carer. The Hub foster carer role is central to the establishment of a community network for up to 10 fostering families. Recruiting experienced foster carers has been key to the successful implementation of the model in Cheshire.

Our 3 hubs available to our foster carers this year have supported kinship families (including families who have obtained Special Guardianship Orders) and Mainstream Fostering Families (including some adoptive families). Our commitment to Mockingbird is strong and our development will be needs led – ensuring as a service that we have the right hub carers, the right liaison workers and full-service support. In constellation one, the MFM Hub Carers resigned, therefore we recruited a MFM Hub Carer



with the skills and experience to take over this role. In September 2024 our third constellation went live, and we successfully recruited the hub carers, which provided us with our first constellation in the north of the county.

There is a fidelity to the model, which is essential to uphold, however, the model is able to be used creatively to meet the needs of the overall service as these change. Our ambition is for hubs to further develop links to our residential homes aiming to assist young people stepping down from a residential home to a fostering arrangement. Part of this would include providing young people with quality time in a family/community setting until the right long-term family can be identified. We would also want to involve young people who are placed out of area where the plan is to return them to their Cheshire community.

Mockingbird Family Model staff continue to benefit from working in partnership with The Fostering Network who facilitate national and regional leadership and operational workshops for staff and carers involved in the Mockingbird Family Model. This is alongside national engagement activities for children and young people involved in Mockingbird. This past year 3 events have been held in Birmingham, both of which were well represented with hub carers and supervising social workers. In addition to this, in September 2024, we appointed a dedicated Team Manager for our growing Mockingbird offer, to ensure its future success and to prioritise its growth.

12. Complaints

In the last year the Fostering Service has received 3 complaints from foster carers.

Information about complaints between 1 April and 31 March of the reporting year

P1	Information about complaints made about the fostering agency or service (including foster carers)	How many complaints did you receive?	How many of these were not upheld?
	From:	Number	Number
P1.1	children/young people	0	0
P1.2	foster carers	3	2
P1.3	children and young people's social workers	0	0
P1.4	other professionals	0	0
P1.5	children and young people's parents	0	0
P1.6	others	0	0

All complaints were responded to within timescales and 2 of these were not upheld, this was accepted. 1 complaint was upheld and was an acknowledgement of staff sickness causing a delay.

13. Fostering Service Annual Report Summary

Over the past year, the Fostering Service has remained committed to expanding our offer and increasing the recruitment and retention of foster carers to meet the growing demand for placements. We are proud to have joined the Foster4 collaboration, which has strengthened our regional presence and enhanced our local offer. As a foster-friendly local authority (as of Dec 2024), we have continued to champion our carers, increasing our Mockingbird constellations from two to three, and hosting more events to celebrate and recognise the invaluable contributions of our foster carers, including long-service awards.

Organisationally, the service has seen positive developments, including changes within the assessment team and the addition of a new team manager role to support the Mockingbird programme. Leadership has remained stable, with the Head of Service and Service Manager continuing to drive forward our improvement agenda, whilst acknowledging changes at the team manager level causing some delays and impact.

Despite these achievements, the national sufficiency crisis has presented significant challenges. The urgent need for placements, including emergency and Regulation 24 arrangements, has placed considerable pressure on both our team and our carers. While we have made progress in converting mainstream carers, doubling the number from the previous year, we have not reduced our reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies to the extent we had hoped.

Fostering remains a cornerstone of our sufficiency strategy. We continue to raise awareness across the council of the critical role foster carers play in supporting some of our most vulnerable children, while also helping to manage financial pressures.

We commend the dedication and resilience of our social work teams in both the Fostering and Placement Services. Their unwavering commitment to finding the right placements and delivering the best possible experiences for children in our care is evident every day. Our foster carers, too, continue to go above and beyond, providing safe, nurturing homes in the most challenging of circumstances.

14. Fostering Service Action Plan 2025–2026

To address current challenges and build on recent progress, the Fostering Service will focus on the following strategic priorities:

1. Recruitment and Retention

- Launch a targeted recruitment campaign in partnership with Foster4 to attract a diverse range of new foster carers.
- Enhance carer support through regular engagement, training, and recognition events.

2. Service Expansion

- Seek to form a Kinship Mockingbird constellation to replicate the mainstream offer.

- Explore a salaried foster carer scheme, including specialist schemes for teenagers and children with complex needs stepping down from residential care.
- Set up a kinship task and finish group to expand our kinship offer

3. Workforce Development

- Recruit permanent staff to reduce reliance on agency workers, particularly within the assessment and kinship teams.
- Seek agreement to increase the establishment of the kinship team to support long-term sustainability.
- Provide ongoing training and development to ensure staff are equipped to meet regulatory and practice standards.

4. Strengthening Compliance and Quality

- Improve timeliness of assessments to ensure compliance with statutory timescales and regulations.
- Strengthen our relationship with the fostering panel through improved communication, preparation, and consistency in presenting cases.
- Monitor assessment quality and timeliness through regular audits and performance reviews.
- Promote the new Foster4 training portal to increase attendance and support development.

5. Reducing IFA Dependence

- Track and review IFA usage monthly, identifying opportunities to transition placements to in-house carers.

6. Foster Carer Offer and Support

- Work with the Local Authority to explore enhancements to the foster carer offer, such as:
 - - Free parking permits
 - - Larger household waste bins
 - - Access to local authority discounts and benefits
- Promote Cheshire East as a foster-friendly employer and community.

7. Cross-Council Collaboration

- Continue to raise awareness of fostering across all council departments.
- Promote a whole-council approach to supporting foster carers and recognising their vital role in the community.