

Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 5th August 2020

Report Title: Review of Fostering Services

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Kathryn Flavell, Children and Families

Senior Officer: Mark Palethorpe - Executive Director of People Director

1. Report Summary

- 1.1. This report provides an update regarding the response of Cheshire East Council to the Ofsted inspection in November 2019, when a recommendation was made to “improve the quality and consistency of support and engagement with foster carers”. In January 2020 an independent fostering review was commissioned to inform our strategic approach and operational practice.
- 1.2. We have been working closely with our in-house foster carers and have already 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.
- 1.3. 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.
- 1.4. Recruiting, retaining, supporting and developing skilled foster carers means that more Cheshire East cared for children live locally, experiencing high quality and stable care arrangements.

2. Recommendations

Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 2.1. Note the update and scrutinise development work and progress made to improve fostering services.
- 2.2. Agree that the ongoing monitoring and oversight of fostering services in Cheshire East will continue via the Corporate Parenting Committee.

3. Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1. 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.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. The only other option available at this point is to take no action following the recommendation of the Ofsted inspection 2019 and subsequent findings of the Independent Fostering Review. If we were to take this approach this would not improve services to foster carers, the cared for children living with them, our ability to recruit and retain foster carers and in addition would have a significant detrimental impact on the moral of the staff across the Fostering Service and wider Directorate. There would be a reputational risk to Cheshire East Council if we did not make progress on the Ofsted recommendation.

5. Background

- 5.1. In the 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 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. 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.

- 5.2. 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'*.

- 5.3. 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 undertake across both the directorate and corporate levels to improve our approach and delivery of fostering services and support at Cheshire East Council.

5.4. The Development Journey

- 5.4.1. 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**.

5.5. Strategic Commissioning and Corporate Parenting

- 5.5.1. 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.

- 5.5.2. 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
- 5.5.3. 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.
- 5.5.4. 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.
- 5.5.5. 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.
- 5.5.6. 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.
- 5.5.7. 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.

5.5.8. 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.

5.6. Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

- 5.6.1. We have already obtained a commitment from the Corporate Communication 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.
- 5.6.2. 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
- 5.6.3. 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.
- 5.6.4. 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.
- 5.6.5. 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.
- 5.6.6. 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.

5.7. Fostering Service Structure and Supervision

- 5.7.1. 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.

- 5.7.2. There is a need for a degree of specialism within the Fostering Service beyond that which is currently apparent and that 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.
- 5.7.3. Proposals are being developed to implement a service re-design and restructure. With the impending withdrawal from Foster 4 there will be a requirement to undertake additional activities within the restructured 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.
- 5.7.4. The development of the fostering service is being monitored through the 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.
- 5.7.5. The Chair of the Foster Panel completes an Annual Report for Corporate Parenting Committee to update and encourage scrutiny of the role of the Foster Panel, for the first time we have also included an Annual Report of the Fostering Service to the forward plan for Committee to coincide with the report from the Fostering Panel Chair to add additional scrutiny to the fostering service development plan. This will be delivered to Corporate Parenting Committee in September 2020.

5.8. Foster Carers Supervision and Support

- 5.8.1. 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.

5.8.2. As part of the Foster Carer Forum's 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, newsletter and publication and the fostering service steering group.

5.8.3. Cheshire East Council 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.

5.8.4. 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.

5.8.5. Our Mockingbird programme is linking with 'Bespoke', which is our new in-house residential /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.

5.8.6. There has also developed a 12 month development plan, which is monitored through the Fostering Development Board, which meets monthly and is chaired by the Director of Childrens Social Care.

5.8.7. Cheshire East Council has 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 are now at the point of implementing the fee increase. This act alone has done much

to significantly improved the working relationship between us and our foster carers.

5.8.8. The department 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.

5.8.9. The department has also developed an information gathering process from the feedback received as part of the annual review for foster carers.

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.

6.1.2. The Memorandum of Understanding that exists within the collaboration has been amended to allow Cheshire East to step out of the collaboration on 30th September 2020 and to protect the Council from any liabilities arising after this date.

6.2. Finance Implications

6.2.1. For 2019/20 Cheshire East Council made an agreed contribution to Foster 4 of £82,110. This was made up of £37,311 for staffing and the remaining £44,799 going towards the overall marketing and collaboration activities. The Cheshire East contribution is 30% of the overall shared fostering budget.

6.2.2. For 2020/21 the Budget includes similar amounts, however the expectation is that half of the marketing and collaboration contribution will be available for re-investment in local provision and the full amount in 2021/22.

6.2.3. At this stage the expectation is that the benefit of cost sharing through the collaboration will be lost to achieve wider improvements. Therefore, some additional investment will be needed in addition to using the £82,111 identified above. This will be considered in terms of opportunities to allocate resources from elsewhere in the Children's Social Care Directorate given the overall pressure on funding.

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.

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 member 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

10. Contact Information

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

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