

Cheshire East Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Sharon Lloyd
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Date of last inspection

N/A

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Cheshire East Fostering service is run by the local authority. It supports approximately 188 fostering households to care for 250 children. A further 23 children are placed with independent fostering agencies and 15 are with other local authority foster carers. The new fostering service was established in April 2009 following the local government reorganisation of the former Cheshire County Council. It has been running for six months. The structure of the Children's Services Department has not yet been finalised and interim arrangements are in place to ensure the fostering service continues to support cared for children and foster carers. The service operates from offices in Crewe and Macclesfield town centres and provides homes for children in small and large towns, villages and rural settings. A team leader and team of supervising social workers, support workers and administrative support staff are based in each office.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The service provides children with support and guidance to lead healthy lives. Through links with the Looked After Children nurse and other health professionals, it promotes children's good health and development. Not all foster carers have written consent to medical treatment and this can delay children from receiving the medical treatment they need.

Satisfactory procedures are in place to keep children safe. However, systems relating to the subsequent assessment of family and friends who care for children initially placed in an emergency are not sufficiently robust to ensure children are protected and their welfare promoted. The records do not clearly demonstrate that children's needs have been carefully matched to carers' skills at the point of placement. Minor shortfalls in the retention of staff records mean that the service cannot demonstrate robust recruitment procedures are in place.

The promotion of enjoying and achieving is good. Children have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of activities. They are supported to achieve well in school. The service promotes anti-oppressive practice and provides carers who can meet children's diverse needs. A shortfall in foster carers to look after children from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds, those with disabilities and teenagers has been identified by the service. A recruitment officer has been employed to target recruitment of carers for these children.

Contact is promoted through clear arrangements and where necessary it is supervised by support workers. Consultation with children and young people is good

although not all young people know about the Children in Care council and how they can influence the development of the service.

A new payments team is being set up because the service has identified occasional shortfalls in making payments quickly to carers. Carers receive payments for skills and there are three payment bands. They receive a satisfactory allowance, above the national minimum allowance. Young people approaching adulthood are well supported.

The local government review left Cheshire East with a number of vacancies in key posts. This has had an impact on service delivery although the service has worked hard to ensure that foster carers have continued to receive a satisfactory level of support and supervision. Additional staff have now been recruited and a reorganisation of the service is almost complete.

Recruitment of carers is a priority as the service has had insufficient staff to ensure the completion of new 'stranger' assessments. Assessments of family and friends carers have continued although they have not been conducted within the regulatory framework.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of Cheshire East fostering service. Recommendations for action made to the former Cheshire County Council have been addressed and incorporated into the new service's delivery.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The service promotes the good health of children and young people. It does this by providing foster carers who are trained in health related matters. This includes first aid, good nutrition and the administration of medicines. Children's health needs are identified and monitored through regular review. Action plans identify who is responsible for ensuring they receive any treatment they need. Annual health checks ensure that children's developing health needs are addressed. Children report that they attend medical appointments and receive good advice to lead healthy lives.

The service works closely with the multi-professional support team (MPST) who provide children and foster carers with help to address emotional and mental health needs. Support for young people who misuse drugs and alcohol is easily accessible. Foster carers who look after children with complex health needs receive specialist training to meet the particular needs of individual children.

The health and wellbeing of foster carers is promoted through routine health checks. A community paediatrician is a member of the fostering panel and provides scrutiny of foster carers and children's health needs. This ensures that children are placed with foster carers who can meet their health needs and that foster carers are sufficiently healthy to look after children well. The service has good links with health

visitors and school nurses. It is developing an improved working relationship with the Looked After Children nurse to further promote children's good health.

Although the service is pro-active in seeking written consent to medical treatment from placing social workers, not all foster carers have this. This means that there can be a delay in children receiving the treatment they need.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

A competent, experienced and suitably qualified manager leads the fostering service. She is well supported by the children's services manager and assisted by two team leaders. Together they ensure that the fostering service promotes the safety and wellbeing of children through satisfactory safeguarding practices.

Children live in homes that are routinely checked to ensure they are safe, adequately furnished and suitable. Some children are placed in an emergency with family and friends carers where there is insufficient space. The implications of this for children and families, should the placement extend more than a few weeks are not always explored in depth at the beginning of each placement. This results in pressure on children and families due to overcrowding and inappropriate sharing of bedrooms.

Matching of children and foster carers for immediate or emergency placements is done through consultation with supervising social workers and foster carers. This means that matching depends upon the individual supervising social worker's knowledge of carers and their strengths and skills. No written match is drawn up at this stage so the service cannot demonstrate that it has carefully matched foster carers' skills to the presenting needs of children being placed. Some foster carers consider matching at this stage is not good enough. Matching for short break, permanent and long term placements is good, with detailed assessment reports being presented to panel for consideration.

Children are protected from abuse and neglect because foster carers are trained and supported to provide safe care. Supervising social workers carry out routine visits to foster homes and at least one unannounced visit a year. They liaise with social workers and support workers who also visit the family and address any issues of concern quickly for the protection of children placed. Monitoring arrangements are in place to highlight any children who are missing from home and support is available to these children through the National Youth Advocacy Service. Restraint is not allowed and the service investigates any restraints they know about. The arrangements for monitoring restraints, additional measures of control and accidents or injuries are not sufficiently robust to provide the manager with a good overview of the service. This means that emerging patterns that might cause concern could be missed. Allegations against carers and complaints are taken seriously and appropriately investigated.

Staff records show that robust procedures are followed in the recruitment of staff.

However, there are some minor shortfalls in some records. This means that the service cannot demonstrate that robust procedures are followed with every new member of staff. Nor can it demonstrate that its recruitment and selection procedures safeguard children well. The service has audited all staff files since the local government review and has taken steps to address the shortfalls identified and to ensure that those responsible for staff records know what must be obtained and kept on file.

The panel is led by an independent chair person. Members of the fostering panel are experienced and knowledgeable with a high level of expertise in their own areas. This ensures that the panel provides good, independent scrutiny of foster carer assessments, review and matching for long term placements. However, the practice of recommending 'temporary' approvals does not satisfactorily safeguard children living with family and friends carers who may wait many months for an assessment to be completed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service recognises the need to provide children and young people with a choice of carers from diverse backgrounds. The appointment of a recruitment officer within the new authority has been prioritised because the service wishes to provide more choice to teenagers, children needing short break care and those children from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds. The service has identified an increase in immigrants from Eastern Europe and plans to target recruitment from this community to increase children's access to carers from a range of culturally diverse backgrounds. The current range of foster carers accurately reflects the local population.

The service trains its carers to value diversity and promote equality. Children and young people living in transracial placements live with carers who are supported to promote their welfare and respect their culture. Interpreters assist children and foster carers to express their views and feelings.

Children and young people with disabilities receive support to lead as full a life as possible. They live with carers who are well trained to meet their complex health needs and to promote their welfare, enjoyment of life and inclusion in the community. The service has a well established short break scheme that includes two specialist foster homes for children with complex physical disabilities. Close liaison is maintained between the foster carers and parents of children receiving short breaks so that children and young people benefit from having their needs clearly understood.

Most children receive encouragement and financial support to develop their interests. They have opportunities to access a wide range of activities, in accordance with their particular interests. Older young people have the opportunity to take driving lessons

as the service recognises the importance of this skill for young people preparing for independent living and employment. An annual achievement award ceremony is well attended and recognises children's individual efforts to develop new skills and work towards their individual goals. Children are proud of their achievements.

Wherever practicable, children live in foster placements close to their own schools in recognition of the need to maintain friendships with peers and the importance of continuity in their education. Foster carers support children to attend school or alternative forms of education and encourage good educational attainment. They liaise well with school. Some attend reviews of children's special educational needs, although this is not standard practice and not all foster carers are included in these important meetings.

The local authority closely monitors each child's school attendance so that it can identify and address any problems quickly. It also monitors educational performance through personal education plans and regular review. Additional support is provided to children where needed. The service works closely with Connexions so that young people who have left school are assisted to find suitable college or work placements and to continue their education to get the best possible qualifications. The service does not ensure through its supervision of placements that all foster carers provide children and young people with the financial assistance they need for bus fares, extracurricular activities and books. One child reported unreasonable delay in receiving agreed additional tuition.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service promotes contact with family and friends. Individual contact arrangements are identified in placement plans and foster carers support children through supervising contact, assisting with transport and making their homes available for contact visits where this is agreed and in the child's best interests. Some foster carers feel the demands of contact can be heavy, especially when several children are involved. Most supervising social workers address this regularly with carers and additional support is put in where necessary. Support workers based in the fostering team supervise and support contact arrangements at local children's centres and provide evidence for court to assist on planning for children. Where children from one family are living in several foster families, clear arrangements for contact ensure that they have the opportunity to meet up regularly.

Consultation with children and young people is good. They have the opportunity to contribute to their own plans and their foster carers' annual reviews. The service has formed a 'Children in Care council' where young people can contribute their views to the development of the service. However, not all young people are aware of this. Children and young people know how to make a complaint and some have done so effectively.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people report they receive help to prepare for independent living and learn how to look after themselves. The multi-professional support team works with foster carers and children to encourage children to develop social skills and address emotional delay and behaviour problems. Children have the opportunity to develop the resilience and independence necessary for future life. Twelve young people live with foster carers as part of the 'Staying Put' scheme. This ensures they do not have to leave care until they are ready. Several young people have returned to foster care under the 'Right 2becared 4' scheme. This gives young people the opportunity to have a home with a family and high quality support through their early adult years. Foster carers who look after older children are appropriately trained.

The service pays a fostering allowance above the national minimum allowance. Foster carers progress through payment bands according to their level of skill and experience. A minority of foster carers have experienced delay in receiving recompense for expenses claimed. The service is well aware of the shortfalls in the procedure and is introducing a new payments team and new systems to address this.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The organisational review in April 2009 resulted in the fostering service of the former Cheshire County Council being split, and a number of key posts in the new service being left unfilled on 01 April when the service became operational. As the structure of the new service has not been finalised, interim arrangements have been put in place to ensure that key managerial posts are filled on a temporary basis. Vacancies amongst supervising social workers and administrative support staff have put pressure on the service and resulted in a backlog of assessments and some reduction in the quality of the service. Action has been taken to address this and a successful recruitment drive has resulted in the recent appointment of a training officer, a recruitment officer, a panel administrator and supervising social workers.

The local authority has reviewed its arrangements for protecting cared for children who are placed with their families and its threshold for initiating care proceedings. This has resulted in a 20% increase in the number of children needing fostering placements over the past nine months. The service has responded to this by increasing the number of substantive posts for social workers in the fostering team. It has also contracted out all outstanding assessments of potential carer other than friends and family applications. This action has enabled the service to continue to provide an effective support service to those foster carers who are currently caring for children.

Policies and procedures from the former Cheshire County Council service have been adopted in the short term and are systematically being reviewed and updated to

reflect the ethos of Cheshire East.

The service has updated its Statement of Purpose so that it reflects the current arrangements. All children receive a copy of the children's guide although this has not yet been updated. The service is engaging with the young people in the Children's Council to look at how this information should be presented.

The interim children's services manager works closely with the interim fostering team manager and her two team leaders. All managers are appropriately qualified, suitably experienced and knowledgeable. Together with the staff team they are dedicated to providing a high quality service to children. They are aware of the shortfalls within the service and plans are in place to address these in the immediate future to improve the service to children and foster carers.

Social work staff receive high quality supervision in their work and usually meet with their managers for formal supervision at least once a month or in accordance with agreed standards. This ensures that managers are kept informed of matters concerning each foster family and the children they care for. The service has continued to support carers well through this period of change and most foster carers have continued to receive monthly supervision as well as additional support by telephone and additional visits as required. Some foster carers report difficulty in getting hold of their supervising social workers and some feel that the response to requests for advice or support is too slow. There are currently no support groups running so foster carers do not have much opportunity to meet as a group and support each other. Out of hours support is provided by the local fostering association but some foster carers do not know about this. Many foster carers and children are unhappy with the level of support provided by placing social workers. One child reported 'My social worker is very good but I don't see her because social services don't have enough staff'.

The quality of assessments is good. However, there has been extensive delay in the assessment of carers for a small number of children placed in an emergency with family and friends carers. This has resulted in some children living with family or friends who are not approved as foster carers for up to nine months or more. There have been some situations where assessments have not been initiated until several months after children have been placed. Some of these situations have carried over from the former Cheshire County Council fostering service. This does not adequately safeguard children and promote their wellbeing. It is in breach of Fostering Service Regulation 38 (2).

The local authority has gone some way to addressing the safety and other needs of these children and considered whether in the short term their needs can be met within these 'emergency' placements with family or friends. It does this by conducting a 'viability study' early on in the placement. Where it is considered that the family could be approved as foster carers, a report is brought to panel for scrutiny within six weeks. A 'temporary approval' is recommended and subsequently endorsed by the agency decision maker. This involves a risk assessment of the arrangement, and a brief evaluation of the placement and how well it is seen to be meeting a child's needs. This is sufficient to ensure children's immediate and basic

needs are met in the short term whilst a full assessment is carried out; however, it is not a sufficiently robust assessment to ensure that children are well cared for in the intermediate - long term. The local authority is taking steps to address this shortfall in their service so that assessments of these placements are carried out in good time.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service operates within a framework of anti-oppressive practice. It provides carers who are trained to demonstrate and promote tolerance.

Staff vacancies resulting directly from the local government review and a 20% increase in demand for placements has resulted in a shortage of placements for some children. In particular, the service has identified it needs more carers who can provide short breaks for children with disabilities and care for teenagers in crisis. The service is optimistic that it will be able to address this shortfall in service provision now that key personnel are in post. Family and friends carers are assessed and supported in the same way as other carers, but the service recognises and is sensitive to pre-existing relationships.

The arrangements for good management overview are not sufficiently robust. For example, systems do not enable managers to have ready access to information about the numbers of foster carers who have completed training, or the progress of Criminal Records Bureau checks. The monitoring arrangements of the service are under review.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- improve systems for obtaining information about children prior to placement so that foster carers always receive the information they need to look after children appropriately, including consent to medical treatment (NMS 12.3)
- ensure that records are kept of checks and references that have been obtained and their outcomes (NMS 15.4)
- ensure the quality assurance function of the panel is thorough and rigorous, in particular in relation to placements made under regulation 38(2) of the Fostering Services Regulations (NMS 30.5)
- improve management systems to ensure collation, evaluation and good scrutiny of information, especially that which reflects children's safety needs (NMS 16, NMS 9.5)
- proceed with plans to develop self help and support groups for carers (NMS 21.2)
- ensure that emergency placements of children with family and friends last no longer than six weeks and that all other placements are with approved foster

- carers (breach of regulations Regulation 34 (1) and Regulation 38 (2))
- ensure the foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there (NMS 6.2, 6.4)
- ensure, through supervision of placements, that all foster carers provide children and young people with the financial assistance they need for bus fares, extracurricular activities and books. (NMS 13.5)