

# Cheshire West and Chester Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	County Hall, CHESTER, CH1 1SF
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**Telephone number**

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**Registered person**

**Registered manager**

**Responsible individual**

**Date of last inspection**

Cheshire West and Chester Council

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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 West and Chester Council was established on 1 April 2009 following the reorganisation of the former Cheshire County Council into two new authorities. Cheshire West and Chester Council Fostering Service is part of the local authority's Children's Services. It provides a range of foster care placements to children and young people who are looked after by the local authority.

The service is centrally managed from Chester. Two teams of supervising social workers carry out assessments, supervision and support to foster carers from offices in Ellesmere Port and Winsford.

At the time of the inspection the fostering service had 190 approved fostering households looking after 234 children in short break, short term, long term and family and friends placements.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The fostering service promotes the health and development of children and young people to a good standard. Children report they are well cared for. The service safeguards children's physical, mental and emotional welfare to a satisfactory standard.

Children live in suitable foster homes, speak highly of their foster carers and know how to make a complaint or seek help. There are good matching procedures for children needing long term placements but matching for short term or emergency placements is hindered by the lack of placement choice. Some children live with family and friends carers who are not approved foster carers and this compromises their safety and wellbeing. Staff recruitment records do not consistently demonstrate safe recruitment processes. Records of allegations and complaints are not consistently well kept.

The service promotes education and achievement well and children have the opportunity to develop their talents and to enjoy their leisure time. Children's diverse needs including complex health needs are met.

Good consultation processes ensure that children and young people have many opportunities to contribute to their own plans, to foster carer reviews, to the training of foster carers and the development of the service. Contact with families and friends is promoted and supported.

The promotion of economic wellbeing is good. The service is piloting the 'Right 2BCared4' and 'Staying Put' projects on behalf of the DCSF. This means that young people approaching independence have the opportunity to return to the care of the

local authority or to remain with their carers into early adulthood and until they are ready to live independently. Young people appreciate this level of care.

Foster carers receive allowances and fees in recognition of their level of skill in looking after children with complex and challenging needs. Children's holiday allowances are not distributed through a transparent and even process and this means some children have less financial support and therefore opportunity for holidays than others.

The organisation of the service is satisfactory. The service is well managed with some shortfalls in monitoring arrangements. Children live with foster carers who are supported by competent and well led staff. The demand for the service is growing and the local authority recognises the need for additional staff to recruit, assess and support more carers. There is currently a shortage of carers for teenagers and children needing short breaks and long term care.

The system for assessing and approving family and friends carers following an emergency placement is inadequate. The service recognises this and is taking action to improve.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory with some good features.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

This is the first inspection of the service since the local authority reorganisation in April 2009. Recommendations made following the last inspection of Cheshire County Council have been addressed.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the health and development of children through close working with other professionals and effective monitoring of children's health needs. Annual health checks are carried out to ensure any developing needs are identified and addressed. Foster carers support children and young people to obtain treatment required. Children and young people report they are well looked after and attend routine check ups as well as appointments with specialists. The service refers children to the drug and alcohol support team, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service or other specialist provision as required.

Foster carers receive high quality training in promoting children's health. They report they have 'excellent advice and support' to look after children with complex health needs. Good nutrition is promoted and first aid training is provided.

## Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

A new manager was appointed to the service a week prior to the inspection. She is well qualified, suitably experienced and competent. She is ably assisted by two team managers.

Children and young people report they are well cared for and feel safe in their foster families. A typical comment from children is, 'I feel safe here. My foster carers care for me'. The service ensures that children live in homes that are comfortable and have sufficient space to accommodate them. Health and safety checks and pet assessments are routinely carried out to promote children's physical safety. Unannounced visits are carried out at least annually and include a bedroom check. However, the records of these visits are not sufficiently detailed to reflect that a safeguarding visit has been carried out.

Good matching procedures are in place for children needing long term placements. However, there is a high demand for placements which results in difficulty in matching children and young people with suitable carers. This sometimes results in delay for children. Supervising social workers participate in a duty rota that deals with referrals for emergency or short term placements. The system for matching children to carers in these circumstances works reasonably well but is over-reliant on supervising social workers' knowledge of carers. Written profiles are not kept on the duty desk to aid this process. This means that the systems for short term and emergency matching are not sufficiently developed.

Consideration is given to the child's assessed racial, religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic needs and how these can be met within the foster family. Children and young people in transracial placements receive good support to meet their particular diverse needs. For example, unaccompanied asylum seeking children receive support from CAMHS, the use of an interpreter and technology that enables communication via translating software. Written foster placement agreements contain information about the child's identified needs and how these are to be met within the placement. However, these agreements are not always up to date or well documented so that foster carers may not have all the written information they need to help them meet a child's needs.

Children report they know who to approach with a problem and how to complain. They know about the National Youth Advocacy Service and have been provided with written information to help them to contact this and other services should they need help.

The service is good at challenging carers or other professionals within the local authority to ensure children's safety. It investigates allegations against carers and refers them to the safeguarding unit where necessary. Incidents of concern are dealt with quickly and children's needs are held paramount in planned and in unforeseen placement endings. Two incidents where children have been left vulnerable by local

authority workers outside of the fostering service have been raised with senior managers and the local authority has taken action to address the concerns raised. At least one complaint investigation conducted by a manager outside of the fostering service has not been sufficiently robust and has lacked independence. This resulted in a failure to recognise changes needed to better protect children.

Management systems are not in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations. The service is aware that there is inconsistency in the way complaints and allegations are recorded and monitored and has begun to consider how to address this.

The service cannot demonstrate its good procedures for staff recruitment. This is because staff files are not consistently well maintained. The panel effectively scrutinises assessments, foster carers reviews and recommendations for deregistration. Members have a wealth of diverse experience that they bring to the discussion. The panel scrutinises family and friends placements made in an emergency, however, it has not been sufficiently impartial or robust in following regulations. Consequently, recommendations for 'temporary' approvals have been made even though the fostering service regulations do not allow for 'temporary' approvals. These placements have subsequently been approved by the agency decision maker. Children's safety has not been compromised as a result of this breach in regulations and the service has recently become aware of this shortfall in practice and taken steps to address it.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The service values diversity and promotes equality. The recruitment policy encourages single and couple applicants from all races, cultures, religions and sexual orientation. Age is not a barrier. All foster carers have equal opportunity to attend training, develop their skills and contribute to the development of the service.

Children and young people's diverse needs are considered within their placement plan and additional support is put in place to meet needs that cannot be met within the foster family. Translators and computer software are available to work with children and young people whose first language is not English so that they have the opportunity to make their views and feelings known. Foster carers are well trained to meet children and young people's cultural needs, to promote their self esteem and individuality. Foster carers who look after children with complex health needs are well supported to provide high quality care. This includes training in carrying out specialist health tasks and the provision of specialist equipment including transport to enable participation in the community. There are insufficient short break carers to meet the needs of the local community. However, those children who receive short breaks are matched to carers who work well with them and their parents. Short break carers provide children and young people with a stable and caring environment that promotes their wellbeing and development.

Foster carers know they are expected to promote education and work with schools and the education co-ordinator to do so. Wherever possible, school placements are maintained in recognition of the importance of schools in providing stability in children and young people's lives. Many children and young people are behind their peers educationally when they are first looked after. Their educational needs are identified through their personal education plans and additional support is provided to assist them to catch up. Extra tuition is provided where necessary. Young children have good access to early years provision. All children have an educational allowance of £500 and this is spent in accordance with each child's individual needs. For example, it may be spent on music lessons, maths tuition or a school holiday abroad. Young people's GCSE results are improving each year. Young people are encouraged and enabled to attend college and receive good support to attend university.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes and develops children's contact with their parents and extended families. Arrangements are clearly identified in placement plans and are known to carers. Relationships with siblings are encouraged and supported and where possible children from the same family live together or enjoy regular time together. The service ensures that children going through care proceedings have regular and frequent contact with their birth parents in accordance with court directions. Support workers or foster carers transport children to and from contact and supervise it where necessary.

Consultation with children and young people is good. Social workers and foster carers listen to children and young people and ensure that their views and feelings are taken into account. Children and young people participate in discussions about their futures and contribute to decisions made. They have frequent opportunities to comment on their placement and to raise concerns. Children and young people know how to make a complaint and know who to go to with a problem. They know about the National Youth Advocacy Service and have phone numbers and contact details of help lines. Carers of children with communication difficulties are encouraged to pay attention to children's behaviours to ascertain their wishes and feelings and there are examples of some good work by foster carers in this area.

The service has established a children in care council to ascertain the views of care experienced young people and to inform the development of the service. A young adult care leaver is a member of the fostering panel. This ensures that the perspective and views of children and young people are given high priority in discussions at panel. The local authority hosted the launch of Fostering Networks 'sons and daughters who foster' project and both birth children of foster carers and children in care contribute to training new foster carers through the pre-approval training.



## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

Young people approaching adulthood receive the support they need to prepare them for independent living. The service recognises that not all young people are ready to leave care when they reach 18 and is piloting the DCSF 'Staying Put' and 'Right 2BCared4' projects. Young people are benefiting by staying with foster carers during their early adult years and are well supported through college, early employment and university. They feel safe to move into independent living in the knowledge that they can return to foster care if they find living alone too difficult. Foster carers receive training to help prepare young people for independent living and young people are involved in delivering this training.

Carers receive payments for skills and a procedure is in place for moving between payment bands. This applies to family and friends carers as well as to mainstream carers so that all foster carers have equal opportunity to receive financial recognition for providing high quality care to children and young people who have complex and challenging needs.

A number of carers experienced a delay in receiving payments when the local authority was first reorganised. These have now been resolved and the service is planning to implement further improvements to the payments system. There is some discrepancy in the allowances received by different children and young people towards, for example, holidays. This means that some children have less financial support than others to enjoy an annual holiday or trips out.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Statement of Purpose clearly reflects the aims and objectives of the service and the facilities provided. The service is managed efficiently and effectively. A new manager has been appointed. She is well qualified and appropriately experienced. The management team is aware that there are discrepancies between the working practices of the two teams and the systems in place for routine monitoring of the service. It has begun to address these differences with a view to improving the operation of the service.

There are clear and well established lines of responsibility for staff. Supervising social workers are all qualified social workers, registered with the General Social Care Council. They are experienced workers who are well trained and supported to meet the needs of the service. They have heavy workloads and there has been some slippage in the number of assessments of mainstream carers that has resulted in fewer placements being available to children at a time when there is increasing demand on the service. There is a particular shortage of placement choice for teenagers, children needing long term care and those needing short breaks.

Foster carer reviews have not always taken place within a 12 month period although

the service has addressed this and has put in place an effective system for prompting future reviews. Since supervising social workers carry out reviews on the carers they supervise, there is no independent scrutiny and review of carers.

The service recognises it has been poorly staffed to deliver an effective, good service. Plans are in place to employ additional workers and establish a third team so that foster carers get an improved level of service and more carers are made available through greater emphasis on recruitment and assessment of carers.

Assessments of carers are competency based and comprehensive. Family and friends carers who look after children in an emergency are brought to panel within a six weeks period for consideration of 'temporary approval'. A viability study that includes a risk assessment and basic information about the placement is completed along with CRB and other checks. A full assessment is often not completed until care proceedings are completed, which can be many months, during which time children live with carers who are not approved foster carers and who may not be suitable to provide them with long term care. This practice is in breach of regulation 38 (2) and regulation 34 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The service has recently reviewed its practice and completed full assessments on all carers who currently have a 'temporary approval', with a view to presenting them to the next panel for consideration of approval.

Good training programmes are available to carers and attendance at training is monitored through the foster carer review. Not all carers have easy access to foundation and ongoing training because the locations for training events are a considerable distance from some carers' homes. Those who live out of authority are disadvantaged because they are reliant on e-learning and Children's Workforce Development Council modular learning. This means they have less opportunity to meet with peers to develop good skills and knowledge about looking after children in care.

A majority of foster carers, including family and friends carers report that support and supervision is good. This means they are well supported to meet the needs of the children they look after. Foster carers value the consistency of support from known and trusted supervising social workers. However, some foster carers feel undervalued by children's social workers, whose practice demonstrates they do not always view foster carers as key members of the professional team.

Records within the service are adequately kept. Monitoring is not sufficiently effective to ensure that detailed records are kept of all foster carer supervision visits. This means that the service cannot demonstrate it is promoting the Every Child Matters outcomes through the support and supervision it gives to carers. Handwritten records are not always legible and records that bring together data about allegations and complaints are not well maintained so that there is no record that provides a quick overview of the number, type and outcome of complaints or allegations. Most foster carers report they receive adequate or good information about children at the start of the placement and maintain good records throughout the placement. However, there are some instances when information is not provided for over a week and in some cases information is scant, even though the child is known to children's

services.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory with some good practice. Although children's diverse needs are considered within their placement plans, information is not always sufficiently detailed. Foster carer supervision records do not demonstrate that children's diverse needs are considered and promoted at every visit. Despite this, children with cultural, language or complex health needs are well looked after and these needs are met by their foster carers and additional services provided.

## **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 the systems for collating, evaluating and monitoring the circumstances, number and outcome of allegations and complaints (NMS 9.5)
- ensure that staff files contain evidence of effective recruitment processes (NMS 15.3 and 15.4)
- ensure that all children's services staff who work with children in care are familiar with safeguarding procedures so that children are protected from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and deprivation in line with Regulation 12 of the Fostering Service Regulations (NMS 9.1)
- ensure that panel members are familiar with Regulation 38(2) of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002 and that they consider this when making recommendations for approval (NMS 30)
- ensure that written entries in records are legible (NMS 25.9)
- ensure that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person which details the nature and quality of care provided (NMS 24.1)
- improve the operation of the service to ensure that assessments and reviews of carers are managed effectively and on time (NMS 16.6)
- ensure that all foster carers have good access to training opportunities (NMS 16.9)
- recruit more foster carers who can provide long term placements, short break placements and placements for teenagers (NMS 17.1)
- ensure that anyone who looks after children for more than six weeks is an approved foster carer in accordance with Regulation 38 (2) and Regulation 34. (NMS 17).
- ensure that foster carers receive agreed expenses and allowances that cover the full cost of a child's living expenses (NMS 29)