

# Cheshire East Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

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| <b>Unique reference number</b> | SC393897                  |
| <b>Inspection date</b>         | 27/07/2012                |
| <b>Inspector</b>               | Sue Winson / Marian Denny |
| <b>Type of inspection</b>      | Full                      |

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| <b>Registered manager</b>      | Judy Bell  |
| <b>Responsible individual</b>  | Julie Lewis  |
| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 25/09/2009   |

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Cheshire East Fostering Service provides a range of placements for children in care, including short and long term and family and friends. It is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval, supervision and support of foster carers. Where placements are not available in house the service uses independent fostering agency placements. The service has approximately 292 approved foster placements and 225 children placed.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

The fostering services provides children with a quality of care which promotes improved outcomes. Unplanned placement changes are minimised as far as possible. A large majority of children in care are placed with foster carers or connected people. Placement choice is limited by an insufficient number of foster carers.

The majority of children and young people have positive views about the quality of their foster placements and their relationships with foster carers and their families. They gain from the fostering service working in effective partnership with their parents and families, other services and professionals. Education, health, early years workers and therapists are available to assist in foster carer training. These professionals also provide advice or direct services to children and their foster carers.

Foster carer assessments cover all the required areas. Family and friends carers are assessed fairly and receive support, supervision and training in line with all foster carers.

Leaders and managers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering service, have development plans in place and a capacity for improvement. There have been improvements in several areas including the involvement of foster carers in planning for children and service development, quality of foster carer reviews and

assessments of children's needs. Recommendations have been made in respect of areas which need further or continued development.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, ensure that children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonable request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)
- continue to implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service (NMS 13.1)
- ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriate qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Ensure that meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills (NMS 21.8)
- increase the number of foster carers who are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers) (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that prior to the placement of each child, the foster carer is provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry out their role effectively (NMS 15.2)
- ensure that reviews of foster carers take place at intervals of not more than a year (breach of Regulation 28 (2))
- ensure that children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements, with particular reference to updating safe caring strategies to reflect the needs of individual children (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that the foster home is inspected annually, without appointment, by the fostering service to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of foster children (NMS 10.5)
- monitor regularly all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the services policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify any patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that appraisals of all staff involved in fostering work takes account of

identified skills needed for particular roles and is used to identify individuals' learning and development needs. (NMS 23.5)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

A large majority of children and young people who are looked after by the local authority live with foster carers where this is the placement of choice and is the best option for each individual child. Placement choice is augmented by the use of Independent Fostering Agency placements, which do not always allow for children and young people to be placed close to their families and schools, where this is appropriate and safe. They are routinely placed with their siblings unless there is a reason not to do so, based on individual needs. Some children and young people have experienced delays in achieving permanent placements, in line with their plans and wishes. A small minority of children experience unplanned placement endings.

Children and young people participate in day-to-day decisions in their foster homes, and the majority in surveys said they were listened to. Their views are not always gained prior to, or as part of their statutory reviews. However, examples were given where children's views have influenced their care. For example, contact arrangements have been changed at their request, their views about remaining in placements long term have been listened to and acted upon. They have access to advocates. Young people also reported an improvement in their participation in service development, through the Children in Care Council.

Children and young people are not routinely provided with written information about their foster carers and their family prior to arrival. They are positive about their foster placements and largely say that they are treated as part of the family. A large majority of those surveyed rated their care as excellent or good. They understand their situation and where appropriate, have the opportunity to engage in life story work. Where appropriate and safe, they enjoy contact with their family and friends and maintain ongoing relationships.

Young people's physical, emotional and psychological health needs are met in foster care. Prompt access to a range of services assists them to develop a positive self view and make attachments. Good communication between social care, health and education benefits them when they move placements, and ensures there are no gaps in provision of services. Children and young people have good attendance at pre-school, school or other education provision, and make good progress in their learning. Their achievements are celebrated and they are encouraged to have high aspirations for their futures. They receive support at times of change to ensure transitions are as smooth as possible for them.

Engagement in a wide range of leisure activities supports children and young people's development and social skills, according to individual wishes and aptitudes. They also have opportunities to broaden their outlook and enjoy events such as

holidays, outings and overnight stays with friends. They expressed satisfaction with the activities available to them.

Young people gain practical and life skills to prepare them for independence and leaving care. Young people were positive about their skills development and comments included, 'my foster carer is great at preparing me for independence. I can now do my own washing, ironing and cooking and I have been taught to budget properly and spend my money wisely'.

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

The fostering service recruits foster carers who are able to meet the needs of looked after children, but not in sufficient numbers to allow for placement choice. A detailed recruitment strategy is in place, however effective implementation has been delayed by staffing deficiencies in the fostering service. This has also affected their ability to complete assessments in a timely manner.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers equips them to meet the needs of looked after children. Assessments address the applicants' competence for the role. They are thorough and detailed and focus on how people can meet children and young people's needs. Foster carer reviews are carried out by an independent chair, however, not all of these are taking place annually. Plans to gain the views of children in placement and foster carers' sons and daughters to inform the reviews, have yet to be fully implemented.

Foster carers are positive about the quality and range of the training they receive. A large majority said that their training is of good quality and is effective in increasing their skills to meet the needs of children placed with them. The involvement of a range of professionals in training delivery, including health and education, provides foster carers with information and empowers them to advocate on behalf of children in their care. However, a significant number of foster carers have yet to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council training standard in foster care.

The fostering panel makes timely, appropriate and child-centred recommendations. Members have a range of experience and skills which ensure that safe, secure and stable placements are promoted, which are in children's best interests. Clear minutes demonstrate considered and rigorous discussion, and record the reasons for recommendations made. The quality assurance function of panel contributes to service development. Applicants and foster carers routinely attend panel and contribute to the discussions. The agency decision maker makes timely and robust decisions, taking into account the panel's recommendations.

The service has worked with placing social workers to improve the quality and range of information provided at the matching stage, however, foster carers do not always have all the information they need to carry out their role effectively. Delays in appointing staff in the fostering service has affected their ability to fully support foster carers with children in placement. For example, not all foster carers have had

a named supervising social worker allocated, there are gaps in supervisory visits and unannounced visits have not always been carried out annually. Foster carers have access to support groups which provide a forum for training and information sharing. Independent fostering agency placements are used where necessary to meet specific needs of individuals. The quality of these placements is monitored effectively to ensure children and young people make progress.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people say that they feel safe in their foster homes, and parents and placing social workers expressed confidence in foster carer's ability to protect them. They know how to complain and have people they can talk to both within and outside of the fostering service. Children rarely go missing from care and if this does happen, foster carers are aware of the correct procedures to follow.

Recruitment, assessment, supervision and training of foster carers have a strong focus on safeguarding and protection, as does their training. However, safe caring assessments are not routinely updated to consider the needs and vulnerabilities of individual young people placed, nor are visits carried out annually in all cases to inspect foster homes without appointment. The fostering service handles complaints, allegations and concerns promptly. The prime consideration is the needs and safety of any children and young people involved.

### **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **adequate**.

The service is managed well in many respects. There are some sound initiatives and solid plans to move the service forward, with a view to improving outcomes for children and young people. Managers and staff are fully committed to the improvement of the service. The implementation of these strategies has been delayed by reorganisation, staffing shortages and delays in filling posts. As a result the impact of improvements is not yet evident, nor can effectiveness be evaluated. The staffing situation has now been resolved.

The managers and staff are appropriately qualified, experienced and skilled. Staff are well managed and effectively supported and supervised. Administrative staff provide effective support which is valued. Annual appraisals have not been carried out with all staff to address development needs. Staff are positive about management and leadership and training. They are committed to continuing improvement. Action has been taken in relation to recommendations from previous inspections.

Leaders and managers monitor their performance and reports are produced to inform future planning and inform the executive side of the local authority. Effective corporate parenting is evident with council members exercising scrutiny, and

committing their time to involvement in task and finish groups to improve services to LAC in foster care. Systems for the ongoing auditing and monitoring of the service are developing.



## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.