

# Cheshire West & Chester Council Fostering Agency

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC393779
<b>Inspection date</b>	08/02/2013
<b>Inspector</b>	Monica Hargreaves / Sarah Oldham
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full

---

<b>Setting address</b>	Cheshire West & Chester Council, Wyvern House, The Drumber, WINSFORD, Cheshire, CW7 1AU
<b>Telephone number</b>	
<b>Email</b>	jean.miller@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	Cheshire West and Chester Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Jean Miller
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	08/10/2009

---

© Crown copyright 2013

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This local authority fostering service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval, supervision and support of foster carers. It provides a range of placements for children in care, including short and long-term placements and placements with connected persons. Where placements are not available in house the service uses independent fostering agency placements. At the time of this inspection the service had approximately 192 approved fostering households and 240 children and young people 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 **good**.

Most of the children and young people who are looked after by the local authority are fostered and the service is successful at providing good quality placements for them. Carers receive excellent levels of support from the service to sustain placements. This enables young people to benefit from living in a stable family environment.

The outcomes for children and young people who are fostered are good. Children and young people are healthy and enjoy taking part in a range of activities that promote their social and emotional development. They have positive relationships with their carers and report that they are looked after very well. Children and young people make good progress in education from their starting points on coming into foster care. Attendance levels at school are very good, which maximises young people's opportunities to achieve. Young people are well supported in their transition to adulthood and progress into further or higher education, employment or training. Placement stability is good with very few unplanned endings.

Arrangements for assessing carers are robust, ensuring that carers are safe and suitable people. Children and young people report a strong sense of safety in their foster placements. Staff and carers work very closely with partner agencies, which helps to secure positive outcomes for children and young people and promotes their

safety.

Children and young people are fully involved in the decisions that are made about their own lives. Their opinions about the service are also actively sought and valued and their input has a positive impact on practice and service developments.

The service is well managed. Leaders and managers demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous development and have a very clear strategy in place to achieve this. Arrangements for monitoring are rigorous and effective in ensuring that good standards are maintained.

One recommendation has been made as a result of this inspection. This relates to foster carer training in methods of physical intervention.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers are trained in appropriate safer care practice, specifically in relation to safe measures for physical intervention and restraint (NMS 4.6)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Most children and young people who are looked after by the local authority are fostered or placed with connected people who are approved as foster carers. There are very few unplanned endings to placements and the majority of young people enjoy long-term settled placements. This benefits young people and helps them to make progress in all aspects of their lives.

Children and young people are influential in the running and development of the fostering service. There is a very active and enthusiastic Children in Care Council (CICC) and a real commitment from the authority to ensuring that young people have a say in all aspects of the fostering service. For example young people are involved in the recruitment and selection of staff across the authority and contribute to the carer recruitment process. They have also contributed to the development of a range of documents, policies and procedures and have produced specific documents for children and young people. These include the guide for young people coming into care and the Pledge, the local authority's commitment to children and young people who are looked after. Members of the CICC provide excellent role models for other children and young people and are confident that participation is real and that their views matter. One young person said, 'It's not tokenistic input by us. I'm just as important as the professionals.'

Children and young people are also fully involved in the decisions that are made about their own lives. They understand their care plans and they contribute fully to their own reviews. They can choose which professionals they want to attend their review and some young people have chosen to chair their meetings. These arrangements ensure that young people are central to the care planning and reviewing process and that their views are taken account of.

Children and young people make good progress from their initial starting point on placement. Their physical and emotional health needs are well met and they are encouraged to develop a healthy lifestyle. Routine health screening is undertaken by designated nursing staff and ensures that young people's general health needs are identified and their progress monitored. Almost all children and young people have had an annual health assessment, routine dental checks and up-to-date immunisations. Young people have prompt access to psychological services to support their emotional well-being. Carers report that they also receive an excellent level of support from these services to help them to understand and respond to young people's needs. There are very low numbers of children and young people who have been involved in drug and alcohol use and there are good arrangements in place for helping them with these issues.

Young people understand about healthy lifestyles. They report that foster carers talk to them about how to stay healthy and that they make sure that they eat healthily and exercise. The local authority provides young people with free leisure passes so that they can access a range of facilities to support them to exercise. Foster carers help young people to identify appropriate activities which engage them in pursuits that reflect their individual interests and talents. These include swimming, dance classes, gym and football and membership of groups such as cubs and cadets. The fostering service also organises regular family events for young people, their carers and their carers' families. These include craft days and trips to activity centres and local festivals. Young people from the CICC reported that they had recently helped to organise an achievement day for all young people looked after, which was well attended by young people and their foster families.

Children and young people report that they are safe and happy in their foster homes. They say that they get on well with their carers and that they are treated as part of the family. These positive relationships promote a sense of security and stability for young people and support their progress. Safe caring plans help to keep children and young people safe in their daily routines. Very few young people who are fostered are involved in risk taking behaviour. Incidents of offending, substance misuse and young people going missing from their foster home are very low.

Foster carers actively promote young people's contact with their families, where this is an agreed part of their care plan. They work with placing social workers and support workers to ensure that young people have a clear knowledge of their background and history. These arrangements help young people to keep in touch with individuals who are significant to them and support their sense of identity.

There is a real drive across the fostering service and the wider authority to ensure that children and young people achieve at school. Carers and staff from the fostering service work closely with education staff to promote the education of young people. The importance of the promotion of education is discussed with carers from the start of their induction into the fostering service and they are given training to support them in this aspect of their care. Carers contribute to education planning meetings, attend school functions and actively promote the value of education. Levels of attendance at school or college are excellent, with the overwhelming majority of children achieving over 95%. This maximises their opportunity to achieve and as a result children and young people are able to make real progress from their starting points. Their progress in education is tracked by staff from the education support team and additional resources are made available for young people who need them. All young people are encouraged to have high aspirations for their future. The education team has strong links with colleges and there is a programme in place to support young people into higher education. This has led to a growing number of young people being able to access university courses. The authority also offers a number of apprenticeships for children and young people who are looked after in order to enable them to gain skills for employment. At the time of this inspection all young people who were fostered and who had completed compulsory education, were in employment, education or training.

Young people report that they are fully supported to prepare for independence within the context of a family life. Support is very much tailored to the individual young person's needs and young people are able to gain skills gradually which they say is reassuring. One young person said 'this is a process, not an event.' The leaving care team works closely with carers. Pathway plans are put in place at an early stage and carers and young people contribute fully to this planning process. The authority's 'staying put' scheme works well and allows young people to make a successful transition to adulthood.

### **Quality of service**

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

There is a dynamic recruitment strategy in place, that is based on a proven model, to fulfil the fostering needs of the local community. This is inclusive, involving young people, carers, staff and elected members as well as representatives from partner agencies such as health and education.

The Access to Resources team has significantly improved the matching process leading to well matched stable placements. If the needs of children and young people cannot be met by a placement with their own carers, the authority uses independent fostering agencies to secure placements. There is very good oversight of all external placements to ensure the safety and well-being of children placed.

The process for the preparation and assessment of carers is robust, with a strong emphasis on safe care and safeguarding. This ensures that a range of safe and suitable carers are recruited. The foster panel works very effectively to ensure that

sound recommendations are made about the suitability of carers. The central list includes professionals and individuals with a range of experience which ensures that there is broad range of expertise and knowledge available within the fostering panel. The panel also makes a good contribution to the improvement and development of the service through its quality assurance function. Fostering panel minutes provide a detailed overview of the discussions. Assessment reports and panel minutes are closely scrutinised by the agency decision maker, ensuring that decisions are robust and safeguard children and young people.

Almost all carers have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's training, support and development standards for foster care and there are clear plans in place to ensure that all carers, including connected persons, complete this within the required timescales. All carers have access to a full range of training to support them in their care of young people. Carers are enthusiastic about the training they attend, reporting that training is 'fantastic' and 'absolutely brilliant'.

Foster carers are positive about the fostering service and report that they feel they are increasingly valued as key members of the team working with young people. They work well with social workers and other agencies to promote good outcomes for young people. The service ensures that carers have the additional support they need to sustain placements. One carer said that the support they had had from the team was 'phenomenal'.

Children and young people's needs are thoroughly assessed and detailed care and placement plans are put in place for them. Foster carers report that when placements are made, they are given sufficient information about young people to enable them to understand and meet their needs. Foster carers are fully involved in the care planning and reviewing processes. They attend all reviews and meetings that are held about young people and advocate on their behalf, demonstrating a clear commitment to ensuring that young people achieve positive outcomes.

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

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

The fostering service is committed to securing the safety and well-being of children and young people and the arrangements to ensure this are robust.

All of the children and young people who contributed to the inspection reported a strong sense of safety. There have been no issues of bullying noted. However, carers are very clear about how to identify signs of bullying and how to ensure that young people are protected from this. There is an emphasis on young people's rights across the service and young people know how to complain. They have access to independent advocates as they need them. There have been few complaints and those that have been made have been responded to promptly and managed effectively.

Individual care plans have good risk assessments with clear action plans. Hardly any

young people go missing from their homes and if they do there are good systems in place for multi-agency working to ensure their safe return. Carers reported that the police response in these situations is very good.

Safeguarding training is provided to carers during their assessment and induction to the service. This is repeated at regular intervals to ensure that their knowledge is kept up to date. Carers have a good understanding of their responsibilities in relation to keeping young people safe and are clear about the reporting procedure. They have copies of the local authority's policies and protocols on safeguarding, including safe internet use. The service has provided training on e safety to all carers, including a specific input from the police. Children and young people are also given good advice about personal safety and internet use. Despite the training they have been given, some carers report some anxiety about getting the balance right between e safety and good parenting and this is being addressed by the fostering team. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board has a task group that is currently considering this issue.

There have been few allegations against carers. Those that have been made have been well managed. There is a prompt response to concerns that are identified and these are investigated thoroughly in order to promote the safety and well-being of young people and their foster families.

Foster carers are trained in safe care practice, including in appropriate responses to challenging behaviour. The current guidance that is given to carers refers to physical restraint, detailing the exceptional circumstances when this might be required to keep young people and carers safe. However, the current training provided does not include guidance on approved methods of physical intervention to support carers if these situations arise.

Social workers from the fostering teams visit carers very regularly to support them and monitor the quality of care that is being provided for young people. These visits are both announced and unannounced. Health and safety risk assessments of carers' households are reviewed and updated every year to ensure that they continue to protect young people and their foster families. Supervising social workers make sure that they see young people regularly during their visits to carers. This contributes to the monitoring of children and young people's safety and welfare.

The authority has robust systems for vetting prospective staff and carers which ensures that they are safe and suitable individuals to work with and care for children and young people.

## **Leadership and management**

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

The fostering service is well managed, with a clear structure and lines of accountability. Since the last inspection the local authority has invested substantially in the service. A permanent senior manager for provider services has been



appointed, with overall responsibility for fostering. A clear strategy has been put in place to develop the service which has the full support of senior managers and elected members. An additional team of supervising social workers has been recruited, bringing the total to three teams. Each of these teams has a team manager who provides management support and supervision to their individual team. This has enhanced the capacity of the service to recruit and support foster carers. The co-location of social work teams and the fostering teams and the strong links that exist with other agencies, supports good information sharing and ensures that foster placements are well supported. Carers, staff and other professionals involved with the service have embraced the developments and the strategy to improve and have really welcomed the fact that their input is valued.

Managers and staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. Staff report that their training opportunities are good and allow them to develop and maintain their knowledge and skills in fostering. All staff who contributed to the inspection confirmed that they feel well supported by their managers. They reported that supervision is regular and that their performance is regularly appraised. This includes appropriate professional challenge. Young people and carers are asked to give feedback on staff performance which contributes to staff development and therefore to the development of the service.

There is a strong commitment to participation and inclusion in the service and the wider authority. This is genuine and purposeful and enables all who are connected with the fostering service to feel they are part of the service development. Carers and staff are enthusiastic about the work they do and are committed to ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and young people are achieved. Foster carers feel that they are valued as members of the team supporting children and young people and a number of carers have welcomed the opportunity to become actively involved in various task groups. One carer commented that since the new service manager's appointment, 'we've gone up a step. We are now part of the team, part of the fostering service, not just foster carers.' Another said, 'it's now not us and them, it's just us.'

The arrangements for monitoring the quality of the service are robust. The care and progress of children and young people is tracked through their own reviews and through the work of the education and health teams. Regular reports on the performance of the service are provided to the authority's corporate parenting group. Elected members take an active interest in the service and meet regularly with managers and members of the Children in Care Council groups. The service works closely with other parts of the local authority and there are strong links with partner agencies. The views of children and young people are routinely sought and are central to the development of the service.

All of the recommendations that were made at the last inspection have been fully addressed and there have been a number of developments in the service since that time. Children and young people have benefitted from these improvements.



## 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 the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.