

APPENDIX 2 – REPORT FROM FOSTERING PANEL CHAIR

9.2 Fostering Panel Overview Report – Panel Chair April 2014 to March 2015.

9.1 Introduction

This Report by CBC's Fostering and Permanence Panel Chair covers the year from April 2014 to March 2015. This is the first full year that the Panel has run just with CBC work and not jointly with Bedford Borough. It has been a busy year and we have run 17 Panels and the number and complexity of the cases has at times been quite challenging. With a number of significant staff changes within the fostering service it has also been a time of readjustment, with staff needing to get to know the Panel and vice versa.

9.2 Panel Membership

I (Kathy Bird) have Chaired the Fostering Panel for Central Beds and Bedford Borough since October 2005. My background is as a qualified child care social worker and manager since 1976 and I have worked mainly in the areas of Fostering, Adoption, Child Protection, Children with Disabilities and Residential Care. I have worked as an Independent Consultant for 17 years and I have worked with a wide range of local authorities and voluntary organisations. I am completely independent of Central Bedfordshire Social Care – a requirement of the Fostering Regulations 2011.

From April 2014 to March 2015 there has been a Central List of Panel members that the Panel could call upon to be quorate. Panel membership was drawn from the following members:

Social Worker – Senior Practitioner (Adoption) CBC – Vice Chair

Social Worker – Reviewing Officer / Team Manager (Fostering) Independent – Vice Chair,

Social Worker / Guardian – Independent,

Educational Psychologist / Foster Carer – Independent,

Social Worker – Family Group Meetings – Independent,

Elected Member – CBC,

Foster Care – IFA,

Foster Carer – IFA,

Adoptive Parent and Magistrate – Independent,

Gypsy and Traveller Educational Consultant,

Independent Family Group Meeting Co-Ordinator,

Social Worker (Fostering) – Independent.

All Panel members have continued to show a very high commitment to attending panels and it is obvious from their contributions that they put a great deal of time, thought and dedication into their roles on Panel. The amount of reading per Panel has increased significantly this year. There have not been any problems in getting Panels together that are quorate (minimum of 5 members with Independent Chair and at least one social worker), even when calling additional and extended Panels. However, it has been a challenging year for the Chair and Panel Admin when most months have had two Panels.

Panel members receive their papers 7 working days in advance of Panel. Reading the papers supplied in preparation for discussion is a considerable undertaking as the papers may involve up to six or seven hours of close reading. All members devote a great deal of time and personal commitment to the work of the panel and invariably come well prepared. Many thanks to all Panel members for their hard work and dedication

Under previous legislation it was advised that Panels had 10 members. Since the introduction of the Central List we have been able to have more Panel Members ready and willing to attend, but we have cut the number of Panel Members per Panel down to usually 7 per Panel. This means that we can still meet the quoracy requirement of a minimum of 5 Panel members but still be able to be quorate if anyone is ill on the day or realises at the last minute that they have a conflict of interest (e.g. someone turns up who is known to them in a personal capacity). Cutting the number of Panel Members to 7 means that the Panel is (slightly) less daunting for applicants and workers who are presenting cases.

Ongoing Area for improvement:

Getting the balance of Panel members right on any Panel remains a constant process of review as Panel Membership changes. CBC still need to recruit some new Panel members who are not involved with other Panels as this will help with availability on extra dates. It would also be useful if any new members had not done direct work in CBC before as this would help with the cases where Panel members are not allowed to sit due to conflicts of interest.

Diversity.

CBC Fostering and Permanence Panel retains members with a wide range of background, ethnicity and culture. Panel members are white British, black British, South African, Nigerian and American. Age ranges go from 33 years to 67 years of age. There are people who are currently fostering and people who have adopted. Some Panel members have very young families of their own, one Panel member was looked after outside their family as a young child, and over half of the Panel members have experience of adoption and fostering in their immediate family. One Panel member is a wheelchair user and many Panel members have experience of disability in their immediate family.

Areas for improvement:

It has always been a difficult issue to recruit enough males to get a balance at Panel and also to get people who are at the younger end of the age spectrum. There have been fewer occasions this year where Panels have had to go ahead with no males present due to the great commitment of our two male Panel members. However, one of those men leaves the Panel in March 2015 and we are about to interview 2 more males for Panel membership. Getting a better balance of age and gender on Panel should remain a high priority for the Panel Adviser to assist the Chair with in the year 2015 / 16.

9.3 Panel Support.

Panel work is supported throughout the whole process by the Panel Adviser. Within CBC presently, the role of Adviser to the Fostering Panel is still not filled permanently and we have so far had three Agency workers in this role this year. All three Agency workers have done their best to try to make things work and the current Panel Adviser is working extremely hard to get things right. However, having 3 Panel Advisers who were new to the role, not knowing the Area or the staff and trying to do this at a time of such change has meant that consistency and follow through of some aspects of Panel work has not been as thorough as we would have liked across the

year. The current Panel Adviser is trying to catch up on some of the issues which had got lost such as follow up from each Panel on Practice Issues.

Throughout the whole year Panel has been supported by two excellent Panel Administrators. This year they have recently been joined by a third member of staff to assist them. I have to reiterate what I said last year, that I cannot speak highly enough of their effort, efficiency, organisational skills and good humour throughout difficult times. CBC is indeed fortunate to have such dedicated workers and as Panel Chair I value their contribution very highly. Since the role of Panel Adviser for Fostering and Adoption has been split into two part time roles staff often go to Admin for issues they would previously have asked the Panel Adviser to do. The pressure of running two adoption and two fostering Panels each month is significant and CBC should ensure that the Administrators receive the best possible level of back up and support – they are often the glue which keeps the whole Panel system running smoothly.

A Medical Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing in advance of Panel Meetings and on occasions over this year the Medical Adviser has been asked to provide further detail on specific cases or conditions to better inform Panel's decision making. With the increase in Family and Friends Carers the timescales for medical advice are tight and on occasions medical advice has not been available until the very last minute or even on the day of Panel. With no-one on Panel with specific medical experience this could lead to cases being withdrawn at the last minute or deferred for further analysis.

CBC's Legal team give advice in writing to the Panel Meetings which used to be given to the Panel Chair at Panel but is now usually sent to the Chair the day before the Panel and read out at the meeting for other Panel members. During the course of this year there could have been closer liaison between the Panel and Legal services but the turnover in the Panel Adviser role has not made this a priority and this is a gap which the Department and Legal services are now working hard to address. The Panel Chair and colleagues in Legal Services are all committed to making the best possible advice available so that Panel can do its job well. The current Panel Adviser is building up positive relationships with the Legal Team and we are about to start a process of Legal Advisers observing Panel

Areas for improvement:

It is my view as Panel Chair that it remains imperative that the role of Panel Adviser is permanently recruited to as soon as possible. It is this role which provides the mechanisms that ensure that the work of the Panel is carried through into Management, the teams and into everyday work.

In 2015/16 there will need to be close liaison with Medical and Legal Advisers to ensure that Panel is given clear, timely and appropriate advice within a time frame which allows Panel to reflect upon the advice offered.

9.4 Panel Roles / Tasks.

The Panel task includes addressing work presented as follows (with the number of cases considered this year in brackets):

- Applications for approval of foster carers for a range of tasks (20)
- Applications relating to Family and Friends (Connected Persons) carers for children already or about to be placed with them (12)
- Taking a view in Connected Persons cases where an additional 8 week extension to temporary approval is proposed in order for assessments to be completed (11)

- First Annual Reviews of foster carers and other Reviews which discuss continuation of approval, extension of approval or Standards of Care (22)
- Matching of children to long term foster carers (11)
- De-Registration of carers (1)
- Quality Assurance of work presented (every Panel)

Panel makes a recommendation on whether to approve prospective carers or re-approve approved carers to the Agency Decision Maker who then either ratifies or rejects the recommendation. Applicants have the right of review through the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) or a return to Panel for the case to be re-heard. Over the last year there have been a total of 76 cases heard at Panel and out of these there have only been 4 occasions where the Agency Decision maker did not agree with the Panel recommendation – one where the Panel did not support the Extension of Temporary approval of a Family and Friends Carer and the ADM made a decision to support the Extension, and three case where Panel recommended approval or continued approval of Carers but the ADM felt this was not the right way forward. In 2 of these last 3 cases the ADM sought additional information, not originally available to Panel. All of these cases had been very complicated cases and the Panel and ADM both respected and understood the reasons for reaching different conclusions. No cases from Fostering have gone to the Independent Review Mechanism this year which is a positive outcome.

9.5 Appraisals

The appraisal of all Panel members takes place annually. All involved value this opportunity to consider Panel functioning, outside the day to day work of panel. The Appraisals, conducted by the Panel Chair and the Panel Adviser, reflect on the Panel member's contribution for the year, any comments they have on improving processes and any training they wish to undertake over the next year. With Panel agendas being more busy this year it has become harder to try to fit these appraisals (which are a legal requirement) around the normal Panel Day. We have had to set up some extra Panel Appraisal time, which of course has additional cost implications.

9.6 Panel Training

There has been one full days training offered to all Panel members in the last year. In September 2014 a Training Day was held for Fostering and Permanence Panel Members together with members of the Fostering Team. This day focussed on the following areas:

- The process of rehabilitation to Birth Parents,
- Family and Friends assessments,
- Updates on the Fostering Service,
- Feedback from the young adult child of a foster carer about what it is really like to live in a fostering household,
- A social workers experience of what it is like to present to the Panel.

It was a very positive day for all concerned and Panel members and staff seemed to get a lot out of the day. Panel members rarely have time on Panel days to talk to one another or to staff and these annual training days (legally required) are much appreciated by everyone.

The length and complexity of Panel Agendas this year have not left time for “Bite size” training sessions but we are ever optimistic that we will be able to fit some of these in soon and have a number of sessions waiting for an appropriate slot e.g. the role of the fostering Reviewing Officer, Out of Hours Duty Service, what it is really like to be a Family Carer.

Panel members now also have access to the on line training programmes which are accessible for staff and Carers.

9.7 Transparency and openness

Carers attending Panel

It is now the usually accepted process for Carers to attend for most of the time their case is heard at Panel. The main exception to this is the time that Panel reaches its recommendation but also a time for any third party information which needs to be discussed. Although Carers are often daunted at the prospect of coming to Panel, many of them say they find the time much less daunting than they feared and feel included in the process as part of the wider Fostering Team right from the start. Carers always have a social worker with them, and some (often single carers) have chosen to bring a friend with them for support. One or two have even gone as far as to say they enjoyed it! (See section on Feedback below). We have also had two older young people in Care who attended part of their own Long Term Linking Panel.

Observers

Student social workers, members of staff on induction, members of Senior Management and prospective panel members, have all joined panel to observe over the last year and there are few Panels without one observer. Panel welcomes observing at meetings. It is an excellent way to see how Panel works and helps to demystify the process, particularly for those who will, in the future, present cases to Panel for the first time.

Panel Feedback

Applicants and social workers attending panel are asked to complete and return an evaluation form - this information is fed back to the next Panel and helps to shape panel direction moving forward. Honest feedback is encouraged and has had a significant effect on how Panels are run.

Issues which have been raised this year which have highlighted areas to consider change are:

- *Two Carers were unsure where to go when arriving at Panel (this is being further addressed via their invite letter and reinforcement of what to do via their social workers).*
- *Two Carers raised concerns about parking – this is an ongoing issue for all attendees to Panel when meeting at Priory House.*
- *One Couple stated “it would be nice for Panel to comment not just on the Carers positives and strengths but also on their children’s”. Panel try to do this as a matter of course but this Carer highlighted how important that can be for fostering families.*
- *Two Carers commented on being kept waiting due to the Panel running late. It is now common practice for the Chair to ask the Panel Adviser to speak with the next applicants waiting if there is any significant delay to the schedule.*
- *One Carer felt they were being questioned more than once about the same issue and that this “made us feel that our integrity was being challenged”. An apology was offered to this couple via their social worker and informed that this had not been Panel’s intention. Panel were reminded that if “their” question had already been answered then they should not repeat issues.*
- *One Carer felt that some Panel members did not make eye contact with her during discussions where the family wanted to extend their approval criteria and Panel felt this was not appropriate due to issues raised by one of their birth children. Dealing with difficult issues where there is disagreement is always hard and Panel members were given time to reflect on this issue and think about whether they may have behaved in this way, and how to manage such issue in the future.*

However, comments from most people attending Panel have been largely positive:

- *"Panel were friendly and professional and put us at our ease".*
- *"We felt very proud and appreciated. Panel was professional and had obviously read our notes and understood us very well".*
- *"We would like to thank everyone involved. We found the experience straightforward and friendly".*
- *"I was given lots of time to answer any questions. A very good outcome. It's good that some of the Panel members are the same so this makes you feel at ease".*
- *"The Panel were the best we have attended, very fair and interested in what we had to say – but made us feel relaxed as well".*
- *"Very good experience for both foster parents and foster son" (A long term matching where the young person attended part of panel)*
- *"We left feeling very pleased and positive. We were impressed with the care which was given"*
- *"Very friendly, welcoming and appreciative".*

9.8 Quality Assurance role.

Panel covers its Quality Assurance roles at a number of levels:

i) Individual Issues

If there are matters which relate to a specific case these are picked up at the time and fed back to the child care and fostering teams by the Panel Adviser.

ii) Practice Issues

At every Panel the Panel considers whether matters have cropped up which may be affecting more than one Carer / worker which need to be followed through. These issues are taken back by the Panel Adviser to the relevant Team Manager and then the Panel Adviser will feed back to Panel any outcomes. Over the last year examples of matters which have arisen in this category include:

- Use of Photobox for Life Story Work,
- Creating Support Plans for Long Term Placements,
- Disclosure of Foster Carers address to potentially violent parent.
- Transfer of Foster Carers Protocol.

iii) Assessments and Reports

Panel will often comment directly to workers and Carers if they have been presented with well written reports. Panel also comment in the feedback section of Panel when Reports received have been particularly good or have been lacking in some way. These matters are taken back to the Team Managers by the Panel Adviser so that staff receive both compliments and requests for improvement via their Team Manager.

Overall, in the year from April 2014 to March 2015 the standard of Report writing has been good. The new format for assessing new foster carers has meant that the assessments have contained more appropriate analysis and less "story telling".

The very tight deadlines for assessments of Family and Friends Carers means that some of the Reports presented on these cases have obviously been done quickly and these Reports need to be better collated and have more analysis of the final picture. However, one or two workers who have specialised in these cases have presented Panel with some excellent work.

iv) Input from Child Care Teams.

As this Panel now takes all the fostering cases for CBC, Panel has had more input from the child care workers. Attendance of child care workers at Panel for long term

linkings and Family and Friends cases makes a huge difference to Panel being able to understand what is really going on in the household. One or two child care workers who have attended Panel have shown an exceptional knowledge and understanding of their work, and have been thanked for their input. When child care workers do not attend for these cases there is definitely not as clear a picture for Panel to consider and it is harder to ensure the "Child's voice" remains central.

v) Panel Chairs Meetings

Under the previous arrangement of joint working on fostering for CBC and BBC there used to be joint Panel Chairs meetings held approximately quarterly with ADMs and Head of Service. As Adoption has remained a shared service these meetings continued until February 2015 when it was concluded that separate Panel Chairs meetings for Fostering needed to be just CBC based. This meeting also set up arrangements for the Head of Service and the Practice Manager (Fostering) to attend Panel regularly to assist with good communication.

vi) Eastern Region Panel Chairs Meetings.

As Panel Chair I have attended all of the quarterly Meetings of the Eastern Regional Fostering Panel Chairs, along with one of the Vice Chairs and another Panel member who is Vice Chair on an Independent Fostering Panel. These meetings take place in Cambridge and Ipswich and are a time for Panel Chairs to meet together to consider the wider national picture for fostering and to improve practice. All meetings are attended by and supported by BAAF and Fostering Network. During 2014/ 15 topics covered have included:

- An analysis of the Bridgend Serious Case Review with particular reference to Panels,
- Staying Put update (Fostering Network)
- Delegated Authority to Foster Carers.
- Transfer of Foster Carers protocol.
- Smoking and Electronic cigarettes.
- Fostering Deaf children

These meetings have been extremely useful and a number of matters from these meetings have been fed back into CBC.

9.9 OBJECTIVES FOR 2015/2016

- Continue to establish the CBC Fostering and Permanence Panel into a strong working team and fully integrate new members.
- Continue to lobby for the Panel Adviser's role to be recruited to on a permanent basis in order to provide continuity and consistency throughout the whole Panel process.
- Work with the Panel Adviser and Teams to ensure that an absolute minimum of new information is presented to Panel at the last minute.
- In 2015/16 there will need to be close liaison with Medical and Legal Advisers to ensure that Panel is given clear, timely and appropriate advice within a time frame which allows Panel to reflect upon the advice offered.
- Continue to review and extend the diversity of panel membership.
- Work on the liaison between the Panel and the Fostering and Child Care teams to assist with joint working.
- Establish a new pattern within CBC of Panel Chair meeting with Head of Service and Agency Decision Makers.

As Panel Chair, some Panel days seem very challenging but I would like to end this report by stating what a privilege it continues to be to have the chance to work with some really good staff but most importantly to have the chance to share and influence the work of some exceptional and highly talented foster carers who show true dedication to the children in their care.

Kathy J Bird
Panel Chair – CBC Fostering and Permanence
April 2015