

Appendix 2

Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council

Joint Adoption Panel

Overview Report – Panel Chair

April 2014 to March 2015.

1. Introduction

From April 2009 to December 2013 Central Bedfordshire hosted the Adoption and Fostering Services as a shared service for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough. From January 2014 the two services separated in all aspects except the Adoption Panel, which situation is currently part of an ongoing review.

The Joint Adoption Panel at the start of this reporting period had moved from previously held monthly half day panels plus extra panels when required to scheduled fortnightly panels due to the increase in work load, with the likelihood that most of these would be full day panels.

Panel Membership

I (Fran Thompson) have Chaired the Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Joint Adoption Panel since June 2013. My background is as a lawyer with additional experience of Chairing several Multi-agency Group environments and Dorset County Council Fostering Panel for 7 years previously. I am also the current Chair for three other Local Authority Adoption and Fostering Panels. I am independent of both Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Authorities – a requirement of the Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (Amendment) Regulations 2011.

The Joint Adoption Panel holds a Central list of Panel members that each Panel could call upon to be quorate. As The Adoption Panel remained a Joint Panel for the period of this report, quoracy continued to consist of :

1. The person appointed to Chair the panel or one of the Vice-Chairs; and
2. A Social Worker with at least three years relevant post-qualifying experience; and
3. Four other members.

Following the increase to two panels a month, it was necessary to increase the Central List to ensure sufficient members to achieve quoracy on every occasion. A focus was given to increasing Social Work membership and to recruiting more male panel members, both of which were achieved.

Panel membership is drawn from the following 16 members:

Independent Chair

Independent – Previously Head of SEN Provision – Neighbouring Local Authority – Vice Chair

Panel Medical Adviser - Paediatrician

Social Worker – Team Manager, Children with Disabilities – BBC

Independent Social Worker – IRO - BBC

Social Worker – Senior Practitioner - CBC

Social Worker – BBC

2 Independent Social Workers - CAFCASS

Elected Member – Bedford Borough,

Elected Member – CBC,

2 Independent Adoptive Parents

Independent Member - CAFCASS

Independent Parent of an Adopted Child

Independent Member - Gypsy and Traveller Educational Consultant,

Independent Member – Adopted Person

Independent Member – Education

In addition to the required six, an extra two members are scheduled to attend each meeting to prevent cancellation and delay if a panel member is unable to attend on the day, or is held up on route. A core group attend the majority of panels and this allows for consistency, particularly when adoptive parents have been approved and return to be matched with their child(ren).

All new panel members are required to attend a panel as part of their induction process before becoming part of the Central List and all panel members have a copy of Effective Adoption Panels (updated 2013).

The Panel have adjusted to their new membership and all panel members work well together, complementing each other's strengths.

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.

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 five 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.

The question of paperless panels remains current.

Areas for improvement:

Getting the balance of Panel members right on any Panel is a constant process of review as Panel Membership changes. Given the possible decrease in the future of panel business, there are no new appointments planned and careful consideration needs to be given when listing Panel Members for attendance to ensure sufficient sittings for each member to maintain competence without numbers of Panel members appearing overwhelming to applicants attending panel.

Diversity.

As in previous years, across Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough there is a wide range of backgrounds, ethnicity and culture. Panel members are white British, black British, Indian and Bangladeshi. There are people who have adopted, two who were adopted themselves as children and one who is the birth parent of an adopted child. Some Panel members have very young families of their own and many Panel members have experience of adoption and fostering in their immediate family.

2. Panel Support.

Panel work is supported throughout the whole process by the Panel Adviser. Within the Joint Adoption Panel presently, the role of Adviser to the Adoption Panel is still not filled permanently and we have so far had two interim independent workers in this role this year. Both have worked very hard to do their best to make things work, but being 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 have been used to or would like to achieve.

Throughout the whole year Panel has been supported by two excellent Panel Administrators. These two workers have been working for the Panel for many years and as yet again, I cannot speak highly enough of their effort, efficiency, organisational skills and good humour throughout. The Adoption Panel is indeed fortunate to have two such dedicated workers and as Panel Chair I value their contribution very highly. I am pleased that they have been assisted this year in the appointment of another member to the admin team as the huge increase of panel work maintained over the past year was difficult for them to incorporate into their already full time roles.

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.

A Legal Adviser to the Panel gives advice in writing to Panel Meetings, this advice is usually available on the day of Panel.

Areas for improvement:

As stated last year, it would be hugely beneficial if the role of Panel Adviser were to be permanently recruited as soon as possible. It is this role which provides the consistency and means of communication which ensures that the work of the Panel is carried through into Management, the teams and into everyday work.

4. Panel Roles / Tasks.

There have not been any changes to legislation or regulations during this period which have directly impacted upon the role of panel. The Panel task therefore continues to include addressing work presented as follows:

- Applications from prospective Adopters
- Matching of children to approved Adopters
- Considering Best Interest Recommendations in the cases of relinquished babies or those where no care proceedings are being pursued through court.
- Quality Assurance of work presented

Panel makes a recommendation on whether to approve prospective adopters, potential matches of children with adopters, and best interest recommendations to the Agency Decision Makers (one each for Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire Council), who then either ratify or reject 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.

As previously stated in the last report, the work required of panel continues to be demanding but remains very interesting. During this period the numbers of cases heard at panel have continued to be high despite the increasing use of Special Guardianship Orders being encouraged by the courts. There is however a suggestion of a down turn now and some future panels have been cancelled in the next couple of months.

The introduction of the new Two Stage Assessment of adopters, combined with a new PAR form, is now firmly embedded and overall Panel generally felt that the forms are an improvement. There has been mixed feedback from the Adopters about the very strongly "Adopter Led" first stage of the assessment and a few issues with information gathered during this stage not being fully explored in stage two but some amendments to the process are inevitable when a new system is introduced and overall it has been a very smooth transition. Panel certainly feel the new PARs are easier to read, and the much increased focus on evidence and analysis is clear.

A new Child Permanence Report (CPR) has also been introduced by BAAF and it is hoped they will receive a similarly positive response overall.

There has however been an unusual increase in the number of adoption disruptions and the authority overall and the Panel are considering the information available regarding the possible factors which could have led to this, and whether or not this may include the shortened assessment process.

5. Appraisals

The appraisal of all 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. All appraisals are in date.

The Panel Chair is appraised by the Agency Decision Maker.

6. Panel Training

During the last round of reviews, Panel members with particular expertise were identified and indicated a willingness to share and contribute to the continued professional development of the panel.

In October 2014, an Adoption Panel Training Day was run. There were 13 attendees. The themes for the training day covered:

- The implications of the revised Adoption Regulations and Statutory Guidance
- Family Finding processes.
- The function of the Teenage Adoption Panel
- An overview of the Highs and Lows of Placement.

7. Transparency and openness

Applicants attending Panel

It is now the usually accepted process for Applicants 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 short time at the beginning of each case for any third party information which needs to be discussed. Although Applicants are often nervous at the prospect of coming to Panel, many of them 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. (See section on Feedback below).

Observers

16 observers arranged to attend and observe panels during the period April 2014 to March 2015 including student social workers, members of staff on induction, members of Senior Management and prospective panel members. Over the last year there have been 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. Panel has been testing a process of all questions being put to the applicants by the Chair of Panel. This has met with a mixed response both from feedback from applicants and from panel members alike so will be under review during the next report period.

I am pleased to report however that of 25 completed feedback forms, the comments from most people attending Panel have been largely positive.

8. Quality Assurance role.

Panel continues to cover its Quality Assurance roles at a number of levels:

i) Individual Issues

A Quality Assurance questionnaire has been introduced for completion by the panel jointly at the end of each case. Matters which relate to a specific case are picked up at the time and fed back to the Child Care and Adoption Teams by the Panel Adviser. This also provides the opportunity for recognition of particularly thorough and well prepared pieces of work although Panel also like to acknowledge this to the Social Workers and Applicants verbally at the time of Panel.

ii) Practice Issues

At every meeting, the Panel considers whether matters have emerged 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. Matters which had been raised during the previous reporting period in this category include:

- Assessments not providing enough analysis,
- Consistency of Legal Advice across the two local authorities.
- Difficulties in obtaining medical information relating to children when matching cases are presented to panel.

Panel are pleased to report that there has been a significant improvement in these areas during this period.

Matters identified during this year include:

- More detailed consideration of sibling contact plans prior to matching panel.
- Information being presented to panel regarding the proposed timescales for introductions.
- Consideration of continued contact with Foster Carers after introductions.

These matters are taken forward in the first instance by the Panel Adviser.

iii) Panel Chairs Meetings

Throughout previous years the Panel Chairs for the Joint Adoption Panel and the Fostering and Permanence Panels for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough, have met on an

- 3 Should be placed for Adoption recommendations were considered. (*This compares with 1 in the previous 12 months*)
CBC 1 BBC 2
- There were no ADM decisions that did not agree with the Panel's recommendations. One decision is outstanding pending further information. One case went to the IRM but the ADM confirmed his original determination.
CBC 1 BBC 0

The above figures show the maintaining of levels consistent with the previous year in terms of Panel business which then showed an increase in Panel Business of over 120% over the previous 12 months (2012/13). This would appear to reinforce the need to ensure that twice monthly panels can be facilitated every month; particularly in conjunction with the reductions in 2013 to the National Minimum Standard Timescales under the 2 Part Assessment Process to 4 months from the date of commencement of Part 2 to the ADM decision. Any delay in waiting to bring an approval to Panel will result in these timescales being exceeded. Panel will monitor the level of business over the next 12 months to ascertain whether twice monthly panels should continue.