



Appendix B

Fostering Agency

**Annual Report by the Chair of the
Fostering and Permanence Panel**

**For the period
2015 - 2016**

CONTENTS

	SECTION 1	3
1.0	Introduction	3
	SECTION 2 – PANEL MEMBERSHIP	3
2.0	Panel Membership	
	SECTION 3 – PANEL ADVISER	4
3.0	Panel Adviser	
	SECTION 4 – PANEL SECRETARIES	4
4.0	Panel Secretaries	
	SECTION 5 – PANEL TASKS	5
5.0	Panel Tasks	
	SECTION 6 - PANEL PROCESS	6
6.0	Panel Process	
	SECTION 7 – QUALITY ASSURANCE	6
7.0	Quality Assurance	
	SECTION 8 - APPRAISALS	7
8.0	Appraisals	
	SECTION 9 – PANEL TRAINING	8
9.0	Panel Training	
	SECTION 10 – AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT	8
10.0	Paper-free Panels	8
10.1	Develop the Quality Assurance function of Panel	9
10.2	Amendment of the agenda	9
10.3	Monitoring of timescales	9
10.4	Panel member profiles	9
10.5	Management of volume of work at each Panel	9
10.6	Continued efforts to ensure that Panel Members reflect the diversity of the community	9
10.7	Further training opportunities	9
	SECTION 11 - CONCLUSION	10

SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION

- 1.0.1 This report covers the year from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016. From 1 April to 23 September, the Panel was chaired by Kathy Bird, and from 7 October to 31 March 2016, was chaired by Suzannah Robinson. This has been a busy year, with twenty-one Panels having been held which usually has meant two Panels a month. As well as the change of Chair, Panel has seen a number of other staff changes that will be addressed in the body of this report.

SECTION 2 – PANEL MEMBERSHIP

- 2.1.1 During the first half of the year, Panel was chaired by Kathy Bird, as it had been since 2005. Kathy was an experienced Social Worker and Manager, having worked mainly in the areas of Fostering, Adoption, Child Protection, Children with Disabilities and Residential Care. Kathy worked as an Independent Consultant for seventeen years for a range of Local Authorities and Voluntary Organisations. She was independent of Central Bedfordshire Council, as required by the Fostering Regulations 2011.
- 2.1.2 I am also a qualified Social Worker, with experience in Fostering, Adoption, Child Protection, Looked after Children and Residential Care. I am currently employed part time by another Local Authority as an Independent Reviewing Officer and Child Protection Conference Chair, and I sit as a Panel Member for the shared Adoption Panel hosted by CBC and an IFA Fostering Panel. I undertake Independent Social Work, mainly in the form of fostering assessments and parenting assessments, and I deliver training in Parent and Child Fostering. I am independent of Central Bedfordshire Council.
- 2.1.3 Fostering Regulations require that Panel runs with a minimum of five members including the Chair or vice-chair and a social worker with a minimum of 3 years' experience in order to be quorate. Panel runs with a preference of seven members where possible to ensure quoracy in the event of any conflicts of interest or unexpected absences. CBC has two vice-chairs, one of whom is independent.
- 2.1.4 Panel continues to have a central list of Members from which attendees are drawn. This list currently comprises of the following:

Independent Members:

Vice Chair: Social Worker – Reviewing Officer, Fostering Team Manager (another LA), Chair of two IFA Panels

Social Worker, Guardian ad Litem

Educational Psychologist, Former Foster Carer for IFA

Social Worker, former Guardian ad Litem, Local Authority and Independent Social Worker

Social Worker and trainer, previously Reviewing Officer, Panel Member for other LA's.

Foster Carer for IFA

Adoptive parent and Magistrate

Adviser and Teacher of children from Gypsy and Traveller families

Foster Carer for another Local Authority

CBC Members

Vice-Chair: Social Worker – Senior Practitioner (Adoption) CBC, Emergency Duty Team

Elected Council Member, experience of children with disabilities
Social Worker – Children with Disabilities team

- 2.1.5 It is important that the composition of the Panel reflects as far as possible the diversity of the wider local community. At this stage, Panel Members range in age from 35 to 67, include both genders and come from a variety of heritage and ethnic backgrounds.
- 2.1.6 Panel Members have shown a varied commitment to attending Panels, depending on their availability and other commitments. There is a core list of Panel Members who are able to commit to attending most Panels, whilst other Members have more limited availability. As Panel dates are set for the year ahead, all Panel Members are able to indicate their availability in advance and commit to as many Panels as they feel they can manage. It is rare for a Panel Member to withdraw at short notice and has only happened in exceptional circumstances.
- 2.1.7 On a number of occasions this year, additional Panels have been required by the agency which involves significant administrative effort to ensure Panel will be quorate.
- 2.1.8 Because of the volume of work, Panel Members have to allow several hours of reading for each Panel, and all come well prepared. It is clear that all paperwork is always read, as Panel Members come with a good level of understanding of the issues, and always with areas they require further clarification on.
- 2.1.9 The process of payment for Panel Members will change from 1st April 2016, with the ability to claim travel expenses removed, and the flat fee increased. This change will reduce administrative processes.

SECTION 3 – PANEL ADVISER

- 3.1.1 Panel has had three different Panel Advisers this year. From April to September, an agency worker undertook the role, then another agency worker took over until a permanent Adviser was recruited in December. Due to unforeseen personal circumstances, this Panel Adviser resigned within one month of starting, the previous agency Panel Adviser was recruited to return to the role on a permanent basis, thus minimising any disruption to the service. The impact of this, alongside a new Chair, has been that this has limited CBC's opportunity to further develop areas of the Panel.
- 3.1.2 The role of Panel Adviser, although not statutory, is crucial to the functioning of the Panel. The Panel Adviser spends a considerable amount of time ensuring that all paperwork is ready for Panel, available in time and complies with regulations and good practice guidelines. The Panel Adviser is the link between the Panel Chair, Panel Members and the Fostering Team and is available at Panel to give advice as needed. The Panel Adviser also takes back issues raised by Panel to the Practice Manager, and coordinates the responses to those issues.

SECTION 4 – PANEL SECRETARIES

- 4.1.1 During this period, Panel has been supported by two Panel secretaries. The quality of this support remains consistently high. These secretaries are shared with Adoption Panel so usually have to support four Panels a month. The volume of work is significant but timescales and deadlines are always achieved. Papers are with Panel Members without fail eight working days before every Panel, minutes are swiftly produced and are of a very high standard, and any additional requests for help or information are

responded to very quickly. The Panel Chair, Panel Adviser and Members have all found this an invaluable support.

SECTION 5 – PANEL TASKS

5.0.1 The Fostering and Permanence Panel's primary legal function is to make recommendations about the approval of Foster Carers including first reviews, subsequent reviews (which take place every three years), changes of approvals and reviews following allegations or complaints, as well as matches of children on a permanent basis to Foster Carers. The Local Authority must ensure that all prospective Foster Carers are considered by Panel before approval and placing children. The only exceptions to this process for approving people as Foster Carers are in relation to connected persons, when a Local Authority can place a child with a relative, friend or other person connected to a child for up to sixteen weeks without referring it to a Fostering Panel, and a Local Authority can grant temporary approval as a Foster Carer to a prospective adopter for a named child. (Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010.)

5.0.2 At the twenty-one Panels held during this period, the following was achieved:

99 cases were presented in total, a breakdown of this figure is as follows:-
30 were presented for approval to include:

- 15 new households were recommended and agreed by the ADM as approved Foster Carers
- 12 approvals were Family and Friends carers
- 1 household was not recommended for approval (ratified by the ADM)

(1 Family and Friends and 1 Foster Carer request for approval was presented twice as originally deferred)

33 were annual review to includes:

- 6 were first annual reviews, approved with no change
- 4 were first annual reviews approved with a change
- 17 were subsequent annual reviews approved with a change
- 2 were subsequent annual reviews approved with no change
- 4 were annual reviews following a complaint, allegation or concern, one of which resulted in a termination of approval.

12 were extensions of temporary approval.

24 were matching children to their permanent foster carers, 6 of which included sibling groups.

In addition, 26 variations of approval were acknowledged.

5.0.3 For a number of these cases, Panel gave advice regarding outstanding work, matching considerations or gaps in the information available.

5.0.4 Although in the majority of cases, Panel supports the recommendation of the Social Worker, there have been occasions when Panel has not reached a unanimous conclusion, has advised a change in the terms of approval, or has deferred a case in order to secure validation of some of the information provided by the prospective carers. The ADM has

agreed with all the recommendations from Panel apart from one occasion when the terms of approval were amended.

- 5.0.5 Panel Members feel confident in robustly challenging information they are given, both in their questions to Applicants and Carers and their Social Workers, and in their recommendations. Panel Members are encouraged to contribute to the summary of strengths, and going forward, will be asked to more consistently provide reasons for their recommendation. This does depend on the timing at Panel as it is important not to keep applicants and carers' waiting long, as this has been identified as an anxious time for them. It is important for the Panel Chair to manage a good balance between providing clear reasoning behind recommendations made and reducing the anxiety felt by Carers.

SECTION 6 – PANEL PROCESS

- 6.0.1 Each case begins with a discussion amongst Panel Members about areas they need further clarification on. The Chair compiles and allocates a list of questions from this, then will go out and meet the Carers and their Social Worker. Occasionally, the Social Worker(s) come in to Panel first to address any confidential or practice issues. Otherwise, it is general practice for Applicants/Foster Carers and their Social Worker to come in to Panel together and respond to questions between them. The Carers then leave Panel and the Social Worker remains whilst discussion takes place and a recommendation agreed. The Chair will then go out with the Social Worker to advise the Carers of the outcome whilst the Panel Adviser gathers together the feedback.
- 6.0.2 Although this process generally works well, there has been some discussion amongst Panel Chairs in the region about whether the Social Worker should remain in the room while the Panel Members discuss their views. Although it is important to work honestly and openly, it is also important that Panel Members feel able to share their views freely, even if those views conflict with those of the Social Worker.

SECTION 7 – QUALITY ASSURANCE

- 7.0.1 the Panel has independent oversight of all aspects of the Fostering service and has a responsibility to provide the Local Authority with feedback on the quality of the work undertaken. The processes by which this is done are currently under review. At present, a monitoring / feedback form is compiled after every case and sent by the Panel Adviser to the Social Worker after they attend Panel, with a copy to his/her manager for them to address any issues in supervision. This form covers the quality of the reports, the verbal presentation of the Social Worker and the preparation of their Applicants or Foster Carers. As yet, this information has not been pulled together in a way that enables Panel to identify any common areas of concern or particular practitioners about whom there are a number of issues raised, so this is an area for development moving forward. In addition, as more general practice issues are identified, the Panel Adviser is raising them with the Practice Manager. These are tracked in order to ensure the issues do not drift without action being taken, and to provide Panel with some indication of the outcomes. This tracking also gives Panel the ability to consider issues being repeatedly raised, or patterns of practice which may need to be addressed through training or more general awareness-raising. Feedback to Social Workers and their Managers covers a variety of issues including timescales, quality of assessments, health, training, policy and procedural issues.

- 7.0.2 These issues are all raised with the Practice Manager as well as individual Social Workers and/or their managers as appropriate. The tracking sheet records the progress of issues raised and outcomes reached. Moving forward, the tracking sheet will be amended to enable it to be a more accessible tool.
- 7.0.3 In addition, Social Workers and Applicants/Foster Carers are sent feedback forms with their invitation letter, asking them to complete it after Panel. The response rate for this form has been very poor, with only 36 out of 100 foster carers responding, and 4 out of 100 Social Workers, so going forward, the Panel Chair will be giving the form to both when updating them about the Panel recommendation, and asking them to spend five minutes completing it before they leave.
- 7.0.4 Feedback responses received are almost always positive. Comments from foster carers reflect a consistent view of Panel as being welcoming and friendly whilst remaining professional. Very few made suggestions for change, but from those that did, one felt it was not helpful to hold a Panel during the school holiday as Foster Carers then have to arrange child care or cut holidays short; one suggested she would like an idea of queries prior to attending; and one found parking difficult and the venue not well signed. One Foster Carer responded that she did not feel positive or appreciated after Panel and found the experience daunting. The Chair contacted this Foster Carer to explore her issues. Whilst she accepted that some of her comments reflected her anxiety rather than the behaviour of panel members, she also made suggestions about Panel's approach and the language used which were helpful and has been used to further develop the panel process.
- 7.0.5 Several of the Foster Carers expressed their thanks to their Social Workers on the form, so these are copied and sent to the Social Worker and Team Manager as well.
- 7.0.6 Of the four responses from Social Workers, three were positive and one expressed concern about the QA process prior to Panel.

SECTION 8 – APPRAISALS

- 8.0.1 All Panel Members, including the Chair, have an annual appraisal. For Panel Members these are undertaken by the Chair and Panel Adviser. Appraisals are organised where possible after Panels to limit the additional costs, but given recent Panels have taken full days, this has not been possible. At this stage, one annual appraisal is overdue as a result of extended Panels during the early months of this year. As this looks likely to continue for the foreseeable future, appraisals will have to be booked in on additional days.
- 8.0.2 Appraisals are the Panel member's opportunity to give and receive feedback about their role and about the functioning of the Panel generally. Any suggestions and ideas are welcomed as Panel is an ever-evolving process as legislation, guidance and good practice change. It is the appropriate time for any training needs to be identified, either because of a gap in the Panel member's skills or knowledge, or to develop a particular interest which can then be shared with the rest of Panel.

SECTION 9 – PANEL TRAINING

9.0.1 There has been one full day's training this year, attended by Panel Members and the Fostering team. This focussed on:

- The role of Panel in evaluating health and weight in substitute carers
- Good practice in the assessment of dogs and other pets of substitute carers
- The Impact of personal values and assumptions on the Panel process
- Life story work
- Permanent Fostering – New guidance and relating this to matching at Panel

Feedback from the training was that it was well received and thought to be helpful.

9.0.2 The possibility of half day bitesize training taking place when a Panel finishes at lunchtime has been discussed again this year but has not been possible, partly because of the high number of cases being presented to Panel, and partly because of the changes in Chair and Panel Adviser which has meant the focus has been on ensuring the core functions of the Panel are completed. Several of our Panel Members have skills in training, or a particular interest which other Members could learn from. It is an area for development, and going forward, the plan is to compile a list of those Panel Members willing to offer an hour or two to share their knowledge, when Panel has the space to do this. In addition, the Panel Adviser will be looking within the Local Authority for other staff who would be willing to share their experience with Panel. This could include:

- Emergency placements and expectations of foster carers – the reality of taking in a child out of office hours (EDT and/or an emergency foster carer)
- Keeping up to date with internet safety
- Evaluating safe caring policies
- Fostering in Practice (an experienced Foster Carer)

9.0.3 It is the intention of the Chair to draw up a list of areas Panel Members need additional training on in order to discuss with the Practice Manager and Panel Adviser.

9.0.4 Panel Members do have access to the online training programmes available to staff and carers but the Chair is not aware of whether anyone has accessed these.

9.0.5 The Chair has begun to attend the Fostering Network Panel Chair's forum, which has been found to be very helpful and will feedback issues and areas of discussion to Panel after each meeting. The first forum focussed some time discussing the process of Panels becoming paper-free, as well as consideration of the McKenzie ruling.

SECTION 10 – AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

10.0 Paper-free Panels

10.0.1 Most Fostering and Adoption Panels are in the process of becoming paper-free. This is currently being discussed for CBC. This is a positive progressive step, however it is essential that the hardware and software are both fit for purpose, and that all Panel Members have appropriate training and on-going technological support (including out of hours as most Panel Members read their papers outside of office hours).

10.1 Develop the Quality Assurance function of Panel

- 10.1.1 It is essential that Panel consults with the Practice Manager to clarify the level of monitoring required, and to ensure that any feedback provided by Panel is constructive in the further development of good practice within the Fostering Service. It is important to revisit the expectations of Ofsted, as well as all regulations, legislation, and guidance, to ensure that the Panel is seen as a 'Critical Friend' rather than an intrusive or collusive part of the process.

10.2 Amendment of the agenda

- 10.2.1 We have made minor adjustments to the Panel agenda in order to reduce duplication of information. However, when there are a high number of cases to be heard, the business items are inevitably not given sufficient attention. Further discussion will be had regarding whether it would be better to spend the first half an hour of Panel covering business items.

10.3 Monitoring of timescales

- 10.3.1 Since October 2015, we have not been monitoring whether timescales regarding completion of the Fostering assessment have been adhered to. This is an important part of the quality assurance role and will be monitored at future Panels and fed back to the Team and Practice Managers.

10.4 Panel member profiles

- 10.4.1 Further discussion will take place regarding whether it would be possible for all Panel Members to provide a profile with a photograph, and for these to be either sent to Applicants/Carers with their invitation letter, or provided to them as they arrive at panel. Alternatively, a photograph of panel could be taken and shown to applicants before they come in. These will need further consideration, as they would place additional burden on the already very busy administrators. Although feedback from Foster Carers has generally been positive, a high number are very anxious before they come in to the room, and to know who is in there and what their role is, may somewhat reduce that anxiety.

10.5 Management of volume of work at each Panel

- 10.5.1 It is important that the volume of work considered by panel is regularly monitored. CBC Panels have frequently been hearing six cases, which involves a significant amount of reading time as well as Panel time. It is important that panel members are able to give each case the time and attention required. However, it is also necessary to be mindful that the running of the panel needs to be efficient both in timescales and cost.

10.6 Continued efforts to ensure that Panel Members reflect the diversity of the community

- 10.6.1 As Panel Membership changes, focus on recruitment will continue to ensure that we have a variety of skills and backgrounds, and to ensure that our Panel includes people from a variety of ethnic heritages, from both genders and with experience of disabilities. Panel hope to recruit further Members who have been looked after as children by foster carers.

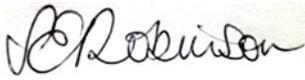
10.7 Further training opportunities

10.7.1 As discussed above, the Panel Chair and the Panel Adviser would like to develop the opportunities available to Panel Members to access a variety of training.

SECTION 11 - CONCLUSION

11.0.1 In conclusion, I would like to thank all Panel Members, the Panel Adviser and the Panel Administrators for their commitment to ensuring that the most vulnerable children in our care are provided with the highest quality foster care.

This Report has been composed and presented for members to consider and note by:



Suzannah Robinson
Chair of the Fostering and Permanence Panel

This information can be made available in
Large print and in other languages if required

Për Informacion

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