

Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council

Joint Adoption Panel

Overview Report – Panel Chair

April 2015 to March 2016.

1. Introduction

Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough run a joint Adoption Panel which previously has been under annual review but in light of the proposed changes through regionalisation is unlikely now to separate before that point.

The Joint Adoption Panel in 2014 – 2015 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. This has now reduced back to one full day panel per month with an additional panel scheduled approximately every 3 months.

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.

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Following the increase to two panels a month in 2014, 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 at the start of this reporting period was 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 – CBC

Independent Social Worker – IRO - BBC

Social Worker – Senior Practitioner - CBC

Social Worker – BBC

2 Independent Social Workers - CAF/CASS

Elected Member – Bedford Borough,

Elected Member – CBC,

2 Independent Adoptive Parents

Independent Member - CAF/CASS

Independent Birth 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.

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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.

In March 2016 it was announced that a new fee structure would be introduced by Central Bedfordshire Council for Panel members, effective as of 1st April. This would see an increase in the panel fee but no mileage expenses being paid. The result of this change meant that tax would be payable on the enhanced element of the fee and several panel members felt this would no longer make it feasible to attend. There were 3 resignations from the panel, two being CAFCASS officers and one independent member with a background in education. Unfortunately two of these resignations were from male panel members which has reduced the male representation on the central list to two.

In addition one Social Worker from CBC resigned due to a job change.

A panel member who is the birth mother of an adopted child has relocated to Scotland however has remained on the list as she still has business interests in the Bedford area and has indicated a wish to continue sitting when she is in the area. Panel are grateful for this given her specific area of personal experience.

The overall central list now stands at 11 regular members plus the one Independent mentioned above who sits when she can.

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 or more 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 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. There is now a need to recruit more male members to 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 two 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

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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 was filled on a permanent basis in December 2015 and we had had two interim independent workers in this role this year. They had 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 had meant that consistency and follow through of some aspects of Panel work had 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.

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 and towards the latter end of this reporting period there has been a great improvement in not only the quality of this advice but the timeliness too.

Areas for improvement:

It has been hugely beneficial for the role of Panel Adviser to have been permanently recruited as 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. It will be beneficial to panel for the improvement in legal advice to continue along its current lines.

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

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- 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.

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 although there has been a slight down turn now and some additional panels were cancelled in the second half of the period.

The introduction of the Two Stage Assessment of adopters, combined with a new PAR form, is now firmly embedded and overall Panel generally continue to feel 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 have been made and overall it continues to result in a high standard of paperwork in assessment. Panel certainly feel the current 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 that in due course they will receive a similarly positive response overall however at this stage the evidence suggests that there is still a way to go for this to become the “living document” that was envisaged.

There was an unusual increase in the number of adoption disruptions in the previous reporting period and the authority overall and the Panel continue to consider the information available regarding the possible factors which could have led to this, and whether or not this may include the shortened assessment process. Whilst Panel are pleased to say that this seems to have abated this year, Panel are more mindful of the learning from these disruptions when considering matches now and are constantly looking at areas to develop to improve this.

Areas for improvement:

The Chair of Panel and Panel Adviser are now considering improvements to the Adoption Matching report and will be looking to develop this further over the coming months along with the Adoption Team Managers for the two authorities.

5. Appraisals

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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. This is a rolling programme and 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 2015 two Panel Training days were held, jointly for the most part with the Fostering and Permanence Panel.

In May 2015 there was a full day training on the subject of:

- What We Learn from Placement Disruptions.

In September 2015 there was another full day training covering:

- An Introduction to Islam and the Muslim faith.
- Effective Questioning
- The role of adoption panel in promoting good outcomes for children.
- The impact of personal values and assumptions on the panel process.
- The importance of analysis in effective decision making.

The Panel Chair also undertakes a regular programme of independent training and attends regular Chair's Meetings with CoramBAAF to keep apprised of developments and updates within the field of adoption and likely future policy changes.

The Chair of Panel and Panel Adviser have started to put together the likely agenda for a training day in the autumn of 2016 informed by suggestions from panel members during the course of their reviews.

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 as part of the wider Adoption

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process right from the start. Prospective Adopters 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

Many observers arranged to attend and observe panels during the period April 2015 to March 2016 including student social workers, members of staff on induction and members of Senior Management. 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 had 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 was reviewed as planned during the training day in September 2016. The outcome of this was roughly 50/50 but combined with feedback from applicants and attending social workers it was decided to revert to the practice of all panel members asking their own questions.

I am pleased to report however that of 32 completed feedback forms, an increase on the previous reporting period, the comments from most people attending Panel have been largely positive, a random selection of which are as follows:

“Smaller Panels works (sic) better like this one, less intimidating to adopters and more person centred. Good panel with members engaged and welcoming of adopters”. (SW - SA)

“It was an experience that was very positive and enabled us to truly show why we would b good adoptive parents”. (ME-R)

“Surprisingly we did not really feel nervous. It was a positive experience”. (DH)

“Panel do an amazing job, they made us feel very welcome and relaxed”. (CE)

In relation to less positive feedback, most related to the questions all being put by the chair which has now been reviewed and reversed.

One set of negative feedback was received from a SW, the issues contained therein were subject to a meeting with the Panel Chair, Interim Panel Adviser and relevant Team Manager for resolution.

8. Quality Assurance role.

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

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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 Prospective Adopter / 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 continue to 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 and it is hoped that a swift improvement will be seen in these areas now that the role is filled on a permanent basis.

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 approximate three monthly basis with the Panel Advisers, Heads of Service, and the Agency Decision Makers. This has been of particular importance during the disaggregation of the BBC and CBC Children's Services.

At a meeting held in February 2014 it was decided that moving forward, both the Joint Adoption Panel and CBC Fostering Panel would meet independently with the respective Panel Adviser, ADM, Head of Service and Team Managers, Twice a year, joint meetings would be held. Bedford Borough would implement a similar timetable in relation to their Fostering Panel.

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The first meeting for the Joint Adoption Panel to be held under this arrangement was held on 22nd May 2015 although without the ADM for CBC, however the subsequent meeting in August 2015 had to be cancelled due to the availability of senior members of staff. A further meeting took place in September 2015 (again without the ADM for either authority), however again the subsequent meeting in November 2015 was cancelled as was one in March 2016. This currently remains to be re-arranged.

It remains to be seen whether this frequency and nature of Panel Chairs meetings will need to be amended or not.

OBJECTIVES FOR 2016/2017

- Work on the liaison between the Panel and the Adoption and Child Care teams to assist with joint working particularly given the turnover of appointments in this area.
- Establish whether the new pattern within CBC and BBC of Panel Chairs meetings with Head of Service and Agency Decision Makers is sufficient and/or productive and priority to be given to dates once booked given the difficulties of getting everyone together at the same time should meetings be cancelled.

Frances M Thompson

Panel Chair – Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Joint Adoption Panel

April 2016

APPENDIX 1 – PANEL ACTIVITY

- Between 1st April 2015 and 31st March 2016 the Joint Adoption Panel met 19 times. Most of these were extended full day panels. This was a reduction from 22 in the previous period.
- 31 Prospective households were recommended to the ADM as suitable to adopt. (*This compares with 35 in the previous 12 months*). This comprised 26 heterosexual couples, 3 same sex couples and 2 single adopters.
- 38 Children (including 5 sibling groups of 2 children) were recommended for match with approved Adopters. (*This compares with 50 in the previous 12 months*)
- 1 Should be Placed for Adoption recommendation was considered. (*This compares with 3 in the previous 12 months*)
- There was one ADM decision that did not agree with the Panel's recommendations. 1 case which had been deferred for the applicant to provide further information was subsequently recommended for approval. Otherwise all recommendations were subsequently followed by the ADM decision.
- One match between out of county adopters and a Central Bedfordshire child was recommended by a majority at panel to be suitable, 2 panel members disagreed. The subsequent ADM decision was not to approve the match.

The above figures show an approximate maintaining of levels consistent with the previous year in terms of Panel business which had shown a huge increase in Panel Business of over 120% over the 12 months (2012/13). This would appear to reinforce the need to ensure that twice monthly panels can be facilitated when needed; 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, and 6 months for matching a child after the date of decision of Adoption being the Best Interest. Any delay in waiting to bring cases to Panel will result in these timescales being exceeded. Panel will monitor the level of business over the next 12 months to ascertain panels frequency.