

ANNUAL REPORT BY THE CHAIR OF THE FOSTERING AND PERMANENCE

PANEL

1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017

Introduction

This report covers the year from 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017. This has been another busy year, with seventeen Panels having been held which has meant a combination of one or two Panels each month. Panel has seen some staff changes but on the whole, this has been a more stable year than last year.

Panel Membership

Panel has continued to be chaired by Suzannah Robinson, a qualified Social Worker, with experience in Fostering, Adoption, Child Protection, Looked after Children and Residential Care. She is currently employed part time by another Local Authority as an Independent Reviewing Officer and Child Protection Conference Chair, and also sits as a Panel Member for the shared Adoption Panel hosted by CBC and an IFA Fostering Panel. She is independent of Central Bedfordshire Council.

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 three years' experience in order to be quorate. During the year, CBC Panel process was changed and it now runs with a preference of six members where possible, rather than seven, to ensure quoracy in the event of any conflicts of interest or unexpected absences. CBC has two vice-chairs, both of them are independent. Panel now makes every effort to ensure that one of the vice-chairs is present at each panel, to ensure that panel is able to go ahead if the Chair is unexpectedly unavailable or discovers a conflict of interest.

During the year, we have had two resignations. One of our Vice-Chairs felt she could no longer commit to the time needed for panel. She had been undertaking the role in the main in her own time without payment, and with other commitments including two other jobs and young children, felt she could no longer manage Panel as well. The other was one of our experienced Independent Social Workers, who had been a Panel member for some time and had made the decision to fully retire. She had previously been a Guardian so had brought to Panel a significant level of experience.

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 36 to 68, include both genders and come from a variety of heritage and ethnic backgrounds. Panel continues to have a central list of Members from which attendees are drawn. This list currently comprises of the following:

Vice Chair-Independent	Social Worker – Reviewing Officer, Fostering Team Manager (another LA), Chair of two IFA Panels.
Vice Chair-Independent (new)	Social Worker – until recently Team Manager of Fostering Team in another LA.
Independent (new)	Social Worker recently retired from front line Social Work
Independent	Social worker and Trainer. Previously Reviewing Officer, Panel Member for other LAs and Connected Person carer for Granddaughter
Independent	Educational Psychologist Former Foster Carer for IFA
Independent	Advisor and Teacher of children from Gypsy and Traveller families
Independent	Adoptive parent and a magistrate
Independent	Foster Carer for IFA
Independent	Foster Carer for another Local Authority, Panel Member for an IFA
Independent (new)	Health Visitor / Named nurse for Looked After Children
CBC Member	Elected Council Member, experience of children with disabilities
CBC Member	Social Worker – Children with Disabilities team

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. However, there have been occasions when a panel member has been unable to attend on the day because of illness or transport issues, and also occasion when a panel member has had to withdraw from a case when a conflict of interest has arisen. Because of the policy of six members attending, this has always meant that panel has been able to go ahead without any disruption to Applicants, Carers and Social Workers.

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 reports are always read, as Panel Members come with a good level of understanding of the issues, and always with areas they require further clarification on.

Panel Advisor

Panel now has a permanent Panel Advisor, which has ensured greater stability and consistency throughout the panel process.

The role of Panel Advisor, although not statutory, is crucial to the functioning of the Panel. The Panel Advisor 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. On a significant number of cases, the Panel Advisor will return paperwork to the Social Worker for clarification and will not book it in to panel until she is satisfied that all the required information is available. This ensures that Panel is able to make a fully informed recommendation, without needing to seek further information from the Social Worker or Applicant/Carer. Applicants/Carers need to be confident that Panel will not become a re-assessment process, so it is essential that the Panel Advisor role is fully supported within the Service to enable the quality of paperwork provided to panel to be as high as possible. This enabled Panel Members to focus on questions which provide evidence of the Applicants'/Carers' level of understanding and insight, rather than factual details. The Panel Advisor 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 Advisor also takes back issues raised by Panel to the Practice Manager, and co-ordinates the responses to those issues.

Panel Administration

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 have to support between two and four Panels a month. The volume of work is significant but timescales and deadlines are always achieved. As part of the panel preparation, the Panel secretary, in discussion with the Panel Advisor, draws up an agenda and sends out invitations to all those attending. Reports are available to Panel Members without fail eight working days before every Panel, minutes are swiftly produced and are of a very high standard, appraisals are booked in and organised efficiently, and any additional requests for help or information are responded to very quickly.

One significant change this year is that Panel no longer uses paper. All Panel members have been provided with an iPad, a CBC email address and a Box account. All reports are placed into Box accounts at least eight days before Panel, and an email sent advising members that they are available for reading. At this stage, each Panel member is finding ways that suit them to record notes and questions, some are using paper for now, some are recording on the iPad using mainly Notes, others are annotating on the documents using other apps. As Panel Members become more familiar with the iPad and different methods of making notes, this experience will be drawn together and a consistent way of working will be agreed.

The Panel Secretaries have been crucial in managing the process of becoming paper-free. They have tested different applications and methods of providing reports to Panel members, have responded to requests for help whenever they can (despite original reassurance that IT support would be available to Panel Members), and they have patiently supported those Panel Members for whom learning new technology has been more challenging.

Panel tasks

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.)

At the 17 Panels held during this period, the following was achieved:

74 cases were presented in total, a breakdown of this figure is as follows:-

16 were presented for approval to include;

- 11 new households were recommended and agreed by the ADM as approved Foster carers
- 5 approvals were Family and Friends carers

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

41 were annual reviews to include:

- 10 were first annual reviews approved with a change
- 23 were subsequent annual reviews approved with no change (including 1 not recommended but agreed by ADM)
- 7 were subsequent annual reviews approved with a change
- 1 was an annual review following a complaint, allegation or concern

(4 Foster Carer annual reviews were either withdrawn or deferred)

7 were extensions of temporary approval.

5 were matching children to their permanent foster carers, 1 of which included a sibling group.

In addition, 41 variations of approval were acknowledged, alongside 4 exemptions.

An essential function of Panel is to assess the quality of the information being presented, and feed this back to the agency, so for a number of these cases, Panel gave advice regarding outstanding work, matching considerations or gaps in the information available.

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 clarify some of the information provided by the prospective carer. Any views expressed by Panel Members are recorded, and if a majority recommendation is reached rather than a unanimous one, clear reasons for dissent are given, to enable the ADM to be clear about the views of all Panel Members.

The quality assurance function of the Panel can be clearly evidenced in particular by the cases either withdrawn following discussion with the Social Worker/Team Manager, or those deferred. On one occasion this year, an approval was deferred, and clear, detailed information by the Panel Chair, on behalf of Panel, was provided to the Team Manager to enable a more thorough, challenging assessment to be undertaken in order to evidence that the Applicant had sufficient capacity and insight to provide good quality foster care to vulnerable children.

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

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 are now consistently providing reasons for their recommendation.

Panel process

This year Panel has introduced a Panel member Profile folder. Prior to Panel starting, the Panel Advisor prepares the folder by removing the profile of anyone not sitting on Panel that day, and this is now given to applicants while they wait. These profiles include a photograph and brief summary of experience of each Panel Member, so the Applicant/Carer is better prepared for coming in to Panel.

Another change made this year has been the positioning in the room. Panel now consistently uses the same room and venue, and has decided that a different seating pattern would be more suitable. Feedback so far from Social Workers and Foster Carers has been that they prefer the new positions as they can more easily see all panel members.

Each case should begin with a discussion amongst Panel Members about areas they need further clarification on. However, despite the invitation letter stating that discussion about their application or review will start at the allotted time, many Carers still come to panel expecting to come into the room at this time. For this reason, and to reduce anxiety, the Chair now very briefly meets with the applicants before discussion starts if possible, to explain the process and give them an approximate timescale for them joining panel. The Chair then compiles and allocates a list of questions from the panel discussion then goes out and meets the Carers and their Social Worker, if she has not already done so, or if she has, goes out to fetch in either just the Social Worker, or the Social Worker and Applicants/Carers. 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 then go out with the Social Worker to advise the Carers of the outcome whilst the Panel Advisor gathers together the feedback from Panel Members.

It has been routine for the Panel Secretary to send out a feedback form to both Social Workers and Applicant/Carers with their invitation. However, the response rate was very low, so from this year, the Chair now takes out forms when she goes to advise the Applicants/Carers of Panel's recommendation, and asks all involved to complete the form before they leave. As most people now do complete them, the response rate has much increased. It also means that feedback relevant to that panel is received that day, rather than feedback being read out to Panel Members who may not have been in attendance at that panel.

Quality assurance

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, feedback is compiled after every case by the Panel Advisor and emailed to the Social Worker after they attend Panel, with a copy to his/her manager for them to address any issues in supervision. This feedback 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 as we move forward. In addition, as more general practice issues are identified, these are recorded during Panel and the Panel Advisor is then 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. Moving forward, the tracking sheet will be amended to enable it to be a more accessible tool. Feedback to Social Workers and their Managers covers a variety of issues including timescales, quality of assessments, health, training, policy and procedural issues.

Feedback responses received have continued to be positive. Comments from foster carers reflect a consistent view of Panel as being welcoming and friendly whilst remaining professional. None made specific suggestions for change. One Social Worker felt that compared to other Panels she attended, the questions asked were too detailed and Panel was reassessing her couple. Whilst Panel took this on board and does regularly consider the appropriateness of questions, it was also fed back to the Social Worker that this Panel is a robust one and will ask such questions if there appear to be gaps in the assessment report.

Other Panel Business

It is important that Panel is kept abreast of changes within the Fostering team, and with fostering on a local and national level. The Panel Advisor provides regular feedback to Panel regarding staff, policy and process changes within the agency. The agency Practice manager has attended Panel twice this year to provide detailed information about areas of change within the department. In particular, Panel has learnt about the changes to the tiered foster care levels and how they are linked to training requirements, and to the Amended Youth Care scheme, now called the Intensive Support Fostering Scheme, the introduction of Supported Lodgings and general updates about staff changes and developments in the Service.

Post-panel

The Panel Secretary who attends Panel provides a draft set of minutes two days (sometimes as quickly as one day) after Panel. These are checked and agreed by the Panel Advisor and Chair, and are then distributed to all Panel Members via their Box account. It is the expectation that all Panel Members who attended that Panel will respond within the deadline given, usually either one or two days. If a Panel Member is consistently not responding, this is addressed within their appraisal. Especially during the holiday period,

Panel Members are expected to consider whether they will be available to check the minutes, when they agree to the dates they can attend Panel.

These minutes are then sent to the ADM, along with all other reports.

At the end of the Panel day, it is the responsibility of all Panel members to delete any notes they may have made in other applications on their iPads. Within 48 hours of Panel, all documents relating to that Panel are deleted from Box accounts by the Panel Secretaries.

Appraisals

All Panel Members, including the Chair, have an annual appraisal. For Panel Members these are undertaken by the Chair and Panel Advisor. Appraisals are organised where possible after Panels to limit the additional costs.

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.

Panel training

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

- A New Approach to Safer Caring
- Motivation of Carers
- The Impact of Mental Health on Parenting
- Travellers of the UK – their Ethnicity and Origins

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

During every Panel member's appraisal, they are asked if there is anything they feel they can deliver in a bite-size training session, and several have agreed to this. So far, on the occasions when Panel has a shorter day, one Member has delivered a session on the experience of the Foster Carers during adoption introductions, which raised understanding of the important role the foster carers play as well as the emotional impact and need for increased support during this time. The Chair has also delivered a summary of the Parent and Child Fostering training, which increased awareness of the many challenges of such

fostering, and the need for the agency to provide much greater clarity of expectation upon the Foster Carers. The Panel Advisor now has a list of other bite-sized training that Panel Members are willing to deliver in the future.

In addition, Panel Members do have access to the online training programmes available to staff and carers and I am aware of at least one Panel Member who has undertaken several online courses and found them to be helpful.

The Chair and one of the Vice-Chairs attend the Fostering Network Panel Chair's forum when possible. These are very helpful in terms of keeping up to date with national issues, practices and legislation, as well as seeking advice and guidance from other Chairs based on their experiences. The Panel Advisor is in the process of setting up a Regional Panel Advisors group, which will similarly be an opportunity to share practice, seek advice and learn from each other about any issues that do, and will, impact on fostering.

On a regular basis, the Panel Chair sends out articles of interest to all Panel Members. This year, these have included "Reunifying abused or neglected children: Decision making and outcomes", "Factors affecting foster care placement stability for young people", "The experiences of young adults leaving foster care", "Ethnicity and Foster Care" and "Contact with Birth Families".

The Panel Adviser will also contribute to keeping Panel up to date with any changes in legislation and policy that may impact on the functions of Panel and will periodically distribute documents that may be of interest and contribute to learning for Panel.

Communication with agency

This year there has been two meetings between the Panel Chair, Panel Advisor, Practice Manager and ADM. These have been useful opportunities to discuss process and practice issues, changes within the service, feedback and learning, both for panel and the agency.

Areas for development

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

Three new Panel Members have been recruited this year, one male and two females, all three are White British. Panel will continue to focus recruitment to ensure that there is a variety of skills and backgrounds, and to ensure that Panel includes people from a variety of ethnic heritages, from both genders and with experience of disabilities. We still hope to recruit further Members who have been looked after as a child by foster carers, and those who care for a member of their own family as a Connected Person. In addition, we are

seeking an additional Panel member with a health background, as our new member has limited availability.

Continued focus on developing a more robust quality assurance and feedback process, with the capacity to track practice issues and identify patterns of concerns and strengths, to enable the agency to continue to develop a service of high standard.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all Panel Members, the Panel Advisor 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.

Suzannah Robinson
April 2017