

Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council

Joint Adoption Panel

Overview Report – Panel Chair

April 2016 to March 2017.

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.

The Joint Adoption Panel in 2016 – 2017 schedules one full day panel per month with a second monthly panel scheduled approximately every 3 months. Additional panels are arranged as required.

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, and for one Independent Fostering Agency. 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.

Panel membership at the start of this reporting period was drawn from the following 13 members:

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Independent Chair

Independent – Previously Head of SEN Provision and ex Head Teacher– Vice Chair

Panel Medical Adviser - Paediatrician

Independent Social Worker – IRO

Social Worker – BBC

1 Independent Social Worker - CAFCASS

Elected Member – Bedford Borough

Elected Member – CBC

2 Independent Adoptive Parents

Independent Birth Parent of an Adopted Child

Independent Member - Gypsy and Traveller Educational Consultant,

Independent Member – Adopted Person

In addition to the required six, an extra member is 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 en 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). An updated 2016 version is available and copies have been ordered for circulation to panel members however as yet they are still awaited.

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 Panel have really benefitted in the last year from the stability of their membership and all panel members continue to work well together, complementing each other's strengths and as a result can more easily identify and respect individual areas of expertise.

As a result of the new fee structure introduced by Central Bedfordshire Council for Panel members, effective as of 1st April 2016, and the 3 subsequent resignations from the panel, two being CAFCASS officers and one independent member with a background in education, the male representation on the central list was reduced to two.

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The area of improvement identified last year to recruit more male panel members has not been met to date however interviews are scheduled for three new members including one male.

A panel member who is the birth mother of an adopted child had relocated to Scotland during 2015 however has remained on the list and has continued sitting when she is in the area. Panel are grateful for this given her specific area of personal experience.

A new panel member has been appointed during this reporting period. She is a former foster carer who went on to adopt a child who has additional needs.

The overall central list now stands at 13 regular members plus the one Independent mentioned above who sits when she can.

Throughout this reporting period, panel members received 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.

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 still a continued need to recruit more male members to Panel along with more social worker representation and a broader diversity.

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 three people who have adopted, three 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. Panel would like to expand this diversity further in other areas and, as mentioned above, this will be a target for the forthcoming year.

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. This reporting period therefore is the

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first full year subsequent to this appointment and the effects of this not only in the quality assurance element of the cases coming to panel but also in the consistency and follow through of some aspects of Panel work has been highly beneficial. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Panel Adviser for this and for the commitment shown to the role in often exceeding her working days!

Throughout the whole year Panel has continued to be supported by two excellent Panel Administrators who 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 continue to 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.

The introduction of paperless panels has remained current throughout this year as many years before and it is very positive to be able to say that this has now been successfully implemented!

All panel members were issued with ipads in around August 2016 along with local authority email addresses. Despite some initial teething problems causing a delay in moving over to being totally paperless, a joint process trial was held in February and the first entirely paperless panel held in March 2016. The early indications are that this is working well and any issues are being addressed as they arise.

The Adoption Panel Administrators, as mentioned above, appear to have made the transition to paperless panels seamlessly (although I am sure not without considerable effort behind the scenes) and their adaptability is remarkable!

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 particularly in respect of the cases from BBC.

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.

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 but largely consistent with the previous year despite the increasing use of Special Guardianship Orders being encouraged by the courts.

The comments made in my previous report regarding introduction of the Two Stage Assessment of adopters, combined with a new PAR form, being firmly embedded remain true as does the fact that overall Panel generally continue to feel that the forms are an improvement. There has still 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 that the PARs focus on evidence and analysis is clear.

A new Child Permanence Report (CPR) was introduced by BAAF more recently and they have received a similarly positive response overall however there has been a far more varied standard in terms of both content, presentation and updating and it is fair to say at this stage the evidence still suggests that there is still a way to go for this to become the “living document” that was envisaged.

There has been one adoption disruption reported this year along with a further disruption during introductions. Whilst this can be regarded as an improvement, 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. Panel are mindful of the learning from these disruptions when considering matches now and are constantly looking at areas to develop to improve

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this and are keen to learn from information gathered on a national basis through forums such as the CoramBaaf run Panel Chairs Briefings which I attend.

Areas for improvement:

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

5. Appraisals

The appraisal of all members continues to take 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. This was put into practice during the Annual Panel Training Day held on 24th October 2016, the areas covered being:

- A Review of the Legal Framework.
- The impact of mental health on parenting.
- Travellers of the UK – their ethnicity and origins.

The Panel Chair also continues to undertake 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. In addition the Panel Adviser also attends the Panel Adviser's Regionalisation Forum and Training.

The Chair of Panel and Panel Adviser have started to put together the likely agenda for a training day in October 2017 informed by suggestions from panel members during the course of their reviews.

7. Transparency and openness

Applicants attending Panel

As reported in previous years, 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

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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 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 2016 to March 2017 including student social workers, members of staff on induction and members of Senior Management although overall numbers of observers have fallen. 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 have reverted to the practice of all panel members asking their own questions having gone through a trial period where all questions were put to applicants by the panel chair. This appears to be preferable amongst panel members and feedback previously gathered from Adopters had suggested a 50/50 split in views.

During this reporting period, a total of 19 completed feedback forms were received, a decrease on the previous reporting period of 32, however the comments from most people attending Panel have been largely positive, a random selection of which are as follows:

- "it was a bit easier than we thought it would be".
- "the fact that most panel members were adopters or had been adopted was re-assuring."
- "we felt that the panel was affirming and positive. The panel were very respectful, friendly and valuing of us (sic)".
- "we felt the whole panel experience to be positive, we understood the importance of panel but our social worker and panel members made us feel at ease and it took the pressure off the importance. Panel was organized and structured".

Three feedback forms were received from Social Workers attending panel.

Where some less positive comments were made in feedback forms received from social workers and from one set of applicants whose case was deferred, the areas identified have been discussed with panel members and the Panel Adviser. A written response has been given, (one is still being followed up) and the issues contained therein will be subject to a meeting with the Panel Chair, Panel Adviser and Team Managers for resolution at the Advisory Group meeting on 18th May.

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One area which appears to be a continued cause for concern is the perceived punctuality of panel. Despite re-wording the Letter of Invitation to Applicants, and asking for information to be fed down to Social Work Teams, the expectation appears to remain that Applicants come into panel at the time on the agenda, whereas this is in fact the time that Panel begin to consider that particular case. In some instances, there has been updated information or possibly documents tabled on the day of panel so this “pre-discussion” can vary in length. Panel would like to see this being explained as part of the social worker’s preparation of the applicants for panel and re-iterated on the day.

8. Quality Assurance role.

As the last couple of years, Panel continues to cover its Quality Assurance roles at a number of levels:

i) Individual Issues

A Quality Assurance questionnaire had previously 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 is now done by way of the Panel Adviser writing individual feedback to Social Workers and their managers.

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 and current 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 have noted that despite a significant improvement in these areas during this period, there is still some way to go to reach desirable levels.

Matters identified during this year continue to include:

More detailed consideration of sibling contact plans prior to matching panel.

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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

Following changes in 2013 to the operating structure of Children's Services in the two authorities, 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, and that additionally twice a year, joint meetings would be held.

During this reporting period, no joint meetings have been held with the Fostering Panel and two meetings have been held with regard to the Adoption Panel on 12th July 2016 and 14th December 2016.

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

- As detailed in the areas of improvement contained throughout the report.
- Establish whether the new pattern within CBC 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 2017

APPENDIX 1 – PANEL ACTIVITY

- Between 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2017 the Joint Adoption Panel met 17 times. Many of these were extended panels. This was a reduction from 19 in the previous period.
- 29 Prospective households were recommended to the ADM as suitable to adopt, comprising 12 from BBC and 17 from CBC. (*This compares with 31 in the previous 12 months*). This comprised 23 heterosexual couples, 4 same sex couples and 2 single adopters.
- 34 Children (including 5 sibling groups of 2 children) were recommended for match with approved Adopters. This comprised 22 from Bedford Borough and 12 from Central Bedfordshire. (*This compares with 38 in the previous 12 months*)
- No Should be Placed for Adoption recommendations were considered. (*This compares with 1 in the previous 12 months*)
- There was one ADM decision (CBC) that did not agree with the Panel's recommendations. Further additional work was done on this case however and the ADM subsequently agreed the approval without the matter returning to panel. In 1 further case the ADM (CBC) asked to meet with the applicant before making a decision.
- 3 cases were deferred by panel, one was subsequently withdrawn.
- Otherwise all Panel recommendations were subsequently followed by the ADM decision.

The above figures show an approximate maintaining of levels consistent with the previous year in terms of Panel business. 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 panel's frequency.