

**Cambridgeshire County Council
Fostering Panel**

**Annual report of the Independent Panel Chair
1st April 2016 – 31st March 2017**

1.0 Introduction

This report covers the work undertaken by the Cambridgeshire County Council Fostering Panel from April 2016 to March 2017. During that period 27 Panels were scheduled and 25 took place. Of the 2 not held, 1 was an additional Panel that was no longer required, and the second was cancelled due to being inquorate.

2.0 Functioning of the Fostering Panel

Panel membership

Under the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, a Fostering Panel should have; in addition to a Chair or Vice Chair and a qualified social worker with 3 years' relevant post qualifying experience; 3 other members who 'between them (have) the experience and expertise necessary, to effectively discharge the functions of the panel'. (Reg. 23 (7)). Therefore 5 Panel members must be present for the meeting to go ahead. Given the increase in the number of cases coming to Panel it has been reassuring to now have sufficient members to draw up an attendance rota, thus sharing the workload.

Towards the latter part of last year, a campaign was launched on the Council website to recruit candidates from the Local Authority and general public, with the criteria for membership of the Panel being a connection to, or understanding of, issues relating to fostering, adoption or looked after children. There was a good response and, at this point in time, a varied and experienced range of personnel have been appointed to the central list. This includes those with personal experience of being fostered, a Councillor who is on the Corporate Parenting Committee, a foster carer approved by a fostering provider other than Cambridgeshire, and an adopter and birth parent, among others.

However, there continues to be a regular turnover of members due to changes in staffing within the Local Authority and the work and family commitments of independent members. For those with an interest in joining the central list an informal discussion with the Panel Advisor or Administrators is always welcomed, as it is vital to ensure the availability of sufficient members with a wide range of knowledge, skills and experience to attend the twice monthly meetings.

All Panel members are interviewed prior to appointment, DBS checks are carried out and references are requested in writing and followed up by direct contact. Members are required to sign a protocol which outlines the Local Authority's expectations, and gives Panel members details of the induction, supervision and support available. Applicants must be able to commit to attending a minimum of 8 meetings a year as well as 2 training sessions. All those sitting on the Panel must sign a confidentiality agreement and are given a Panel Handbook, which covers relevant legislation, guidance and policies. If all the requirements for membership

are met, an applicant's name is placed on the 'central list' from which attendance at Panel is drawn.

It is important to recognise the dedication of existing Panel members, who come well prepared having carefully studied the often lengthy reports in preparation for each meeting. The Panel works well as a team but members are supported to constructively challenge when necessary, as this ensures the objectivity and openness so essential to an effective Panel.

Functions of the Panel

The role of the Fostering Panel is to consider the new approval, continued approval, variation of approval terms, and termination of approval of applicants and foster carers who care for children and young people up to the age of 18. The Panel also specifies, guided by the assessing or fostering social worker, the most appropriate approval terms which may include the number, age, gender and placement type, for example time limited or respite, for each approved carer.

Under the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 the Panel considers the first annual review of each fostering household. Reviews are then brought back to Panel every 5 years to ensure that support, development and training needs are being met and that the approval terms remain appropriate. All other annual reviews are carried out by a carer's fostering social worker and signed off by the Decision Maker. Panel are notified of any complaints, allegations of abuse or standard of care concerns.

Approvals include those of family and friend's carers, also known as connected persons, who have been granted temporary approval under Reg. 24 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 for named children only. In some cases, it has not been possible to carry out the necessary reports and checks within the temporary approval timescale of 16 weeks. The Panel's view should be sought before a one-off extension of 8 weeks, under Reg. 25 (CPPCR 2010) is granted. The decision as to whether the extension is agreed is made by the Decision Maker.

The Panel has a quality assurance role, giving feedback to the Fostering Service on the standard of annual fostering household reviews (AFHR) and assessments, aiming always to achieve best practice. Any issues relating to the quality of work presented by social work teams, other than the Fostering Service, are fed back through the Panel Adviser to the social worker and/or team manager.

With the advent of the Staying Put scheme there will be young people up to the age of 21 (or 24 if continuing in full time education) who will remain living with their long-term foster carers. However, young people over the age of 18 are no longer looked after and Staying Put is an agreement between the carer and the young person who contributes financially if they are in paid employment.

Areas for further discussion:

- There needs to be continued recruitment of independent Panel members from a diverse range of backgrounds, with relevant personal and professional experience to ensure a balanced membership that reflects the local community.
- Encouragement to staff working for the Council to apply for membership of the central list. Panel membership is an opportunity for career development, broadening experience and skills.

Support to Panel

The Panel is very efficiently organised by Tessa Bruce and Lauren Watson. Their attention to detail gives member's confidence in the Panel process, and members are grateful for their commitment. Papers are circulated 5 working days prior to each Panel; an administrator takes the minutes of each meeting and these are circulated to everyone who attended within a further 5 days.

The role of the Panel Adviser, which is not a statutory requirement, was undertaken by the Policy and Practice Standards Manager up until the end of last year. There has subsequently been a range of staff, including senior managers and social workers who have stepped into the role and ably guided members with their knowledge of Cambridgeshire's policies and procedures. The permanent post of Panel Advisor will be advertised shortly, and the role will now be overseen outside of the Fostering Service, within the quality assurance team.

The Panel has, on many occasions, welcomed Jill Blose as Panel Adviser and I'm sure I speak for all members in thanking her for many years of support and guidance, which has been much appreciated. We wish her well following her retirement from Cambridgeshire.

Over the last year, members have become more aware of the duplication of information in reports and Panel are looking to work with the Fostering Service to streamline and reduce the volume of paperwork submitted. The Panel requires in depth information to make an informed recommendation, but equally does not need to physically see all the forms relating to a case if they can be easily summarised within the main body of the report. Working with the Fostering Service, Panel would like to review and revise the format of a wide range of reports so that we can jointly establish a benchmark for the work presented to Panel; with key information analysed and the focus on providing supporting 'evidence' to demonstrate the skills of applicants and carers to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The Panel can request support from a Medical Officer and Legal Adviser, but this is rarely necessary as any queries have traditionally been requested and fed back through the Panel Adviser. In addition, given the breadth of knowledge held within the Panel by members who have professional expertise, essential

information is often readily available. However, as part of an annual Panel Business Meeting it would be helpful to meet with the Medical Officer and Legal Adviser to discuss their role and the support available to Panel.

Areas for further discussion

- There is a need to establish consistency in the documents submitted to Panel for each type of presentation.
- Further work and consultation between the Fostering Service and Panel on the analysis and use of supporting evidence (e.g. examples of practice) in reports.
- An invitation to the Medical Officer and Legal Adviser to meet with the Panel.

Panel roles and tasks

The work of the Panel during the last year is outlined in the attached table and chart, with annual fostering household reviews constituting the bulk of the work. Panel members have continued to express an interest in having feedback on the outcome of long term fostering matches. Sadly, not all of these are successful, and Panel members feel there would be considerable benefit from liaison with the manager responsible for convening disruption meetings. This is seen by the Panel as a valuable opportunity for learning.

Panel makes a recommendation to the Decision Maker, Richard Holland who makes 'a considered decision ... within seven working days of receipt of the final set of minutes'. Applicants and foster carers are 'informed orally of the decision maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working days.' (National Minimum Standards for Foster Care 2011, Standard 14.9 & 14.10).

The Decision Maker can request additional information, that may not have been available to the Panel, to assist in making a final decision. Over the course of the last year the recommendations of the Panel, and the decisions of the Decision Maker, have mostly agreed. An important contribution to decision making is the final copy of minutes. These are initially reviewed by the Chair and Advisor before being forwarded to those members who attended the relevant meeting. The level of scrutiny is robust and ensures that the Panel's recommendations are well evidenced and provide an accurate record, not only for the Local Authority, but also for those attending Panel as prospective or approved foster carers.

Areas for further discussion

- Arranging training for members on achieving positive outcomes for children and young people in long term fostering placements, informed by reports from disruption meetings following placement breakdowns.

Appraisals

The appraisal of Panel members takes place annually. The Chair and Advisor have been carrying out appraisals after each Panel meeting and the subsequent reports detail the member's contribution to Panel, objectives for the following year, feedback on the effectiveness of the Panel and any areas for development and training, for either the individual or Panel. A copy is given to the member and another is placed on their Panel personnel file.

Panel training and business meetings

By signing the protocol members agree to attend training. This is an essential component of the Quality Assurance role of Panel. There is an expectation that members keep up to date with any developments or research relevant to Panel business and, in addition, the Chair regularly feeds back any changes within national legislation, guidance and practice.

In February 2017 Panel members attended training on 'Mentalization', having heard many foster carers speak highly of the benefits of adopting a model that helped them have a better understanding of the possible reasons behind young people's behaviour. The training outlined the need to be more attentive to a child's mental state, both physically and psychologically, and provided an insight into the importance of a carer's day to day interaction with any child placed with them.

Informal training took place under Any Other Business, with a valuable discussion on 2 Serious Case Reviews (originating from the Safeguarding Children Board of London Borough of Hackney and City and SCB Croydon). Both cases had findings which were highly relevant to the functioning of Fostering Panels. It is hoped to engage with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for further discussion on how best the Panel can incorporate the recommendations of these reviews.

Training on Safeguarding was also made available to members, either online or by attending courses listed in the Foster Carer's Training Programme. There has also been discussion on holding a Panel Business Meeting annually to, for example, address the issues raised in the annual report as well as the general functioning of the Panel. The first of these was held in April 2017.

Areas for further discussion:

- Use of 'Any Other Business' to discuss any practice issues raised and identify any training needs for the Panel.
- Set dates for training and Business Meetings for the next year.

3.0 The Panel meeting

Carers attendance at Panel

Prospective and approved foster carers are actively encouraged to attend every Panel that is discussing issues relating to them. Carers and applicants are

invited to be present in the meeting, other than when third party information or the recommendation, and reasons for it, are being discussed. Panel members are very aware that attendance at Panel can be quite overwhelming and every effort is made to welcome and support carers. A booklet which gives details of each Panel member's background will also be made available in the waiting room. This is now being completed and will include information on newly appointed members.

The aim of the Panel is to be open, transparent and fair. At times the Panel will need to address areas of concern with a foster carer, and any such discussion will be carried out sensitively, recognising the carer's strengths and the complexity of the fostering task. However, throughout all the Panel's work, members will maintain their focus on promoting the best interests and outcomes of the children and young people we look after.

Over the last year, Panel have highlighted that annual household reviews tend to concentrate on the main carer, who is more frequently than not, female. Contributions from, or discussion about male carer's role is often absent or limited. Although male carers may have work commitments that prohibit them attending Panel, members would like to see them more fully represented within reports, in acknowledgement of the important role they play within the fostering household.

Attendance by Social Workers

In addition to the presenting social worker, Panel would encourage a young person's social worker to attend for matters such as matching for a long term fostering placement, as they have a great deal to contribute to the discussion given their close relationship with the child.

Panel have warmly welcomed young person to contribute directly to Panel when appropriate, for example, when considering their long-term match or agreeing a Staying Put arrangement. The Panel has received written representation from young people and, on many occasions, impressive multimedia presentations incorporating graphics and music.

Observers

There are frequent requests to observe Panel, but there is a restriction of 1 observer at each meeting, although invitations may relate to either a morning or afternoon session to increase the 'slots' available. Observers come from a range of backgrounds, which include student social workers, new members of staff attending as part of their induction, prospective Panel members or senior management. Observers must sign a confidentiality form and are made aware, by the Chair, that they cannot contribute to Panel and must declare any conflict of interest. At the end of the meeting observers are encouraged to ask questions and give feedback on the Panels effectiveness.

Panel feedback

Panel members' complete forms to give feedback to presenting staff, and forms are also available for feedback from workers and foster carers to the Panel. Comments relating to the experience of attending Panel are very positive. Those that raise concerns are followed through by the Panel Advisor and Chair. The feedback forms are due to be revised to broaden the scope of the information requested. Feedback forms are sent out with invitation letters and are also available in the waiting room.

Areas for further discussion

- Review of the circulation and format of feedback forms.
- Encouragement of children's social workers to contribute to annual fostering household reviews.
- Face to face interviews by fostering social workers with looked after children and carer's own children to increase the feedback for annual fostering household reviews and matching for long term placements.
- Agreeing a set process for the Panel Adviser to give feedback on practice issues to social workers and/or their line managers and subsequently inform Panel of the outcome of such feedback.

4.0 Quality Assurance

Reports of a high standard are recognised, the author thanked and any additional comments from members are recorded in the minutes. The majority of reports presented to Panel are of a good standard, giving all the information necessary to make an informed decision.

Issues relating to reports that do not contain sufficient information are recorded in the Panel feedback form and are discussed with the presenting social worker and their manager by the Adviser.

Members would welcome involvement when changes to policies, procedures and practice are being considered within the Fostering Service as this relates to the Panel's Quality Assurance role.

5.0 Objectives for April 2017 to March 2018

- Continued recruitment of Panel members who reflect the wider community or can provide specific knowledge or experience relevant to looked after children. For example, in the area of education, health, promoting independence or unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- Consideration as to how the information is presented for cases for matching to ensure that the report is objective and would be beneficial to a young person who wishes to access their file at a later date.
- To arrange joint training and Business Meetings for the Panel and Fostering Service.
- To promote and highlight the valued role of male foster carers in fostering household reviews and support their engagement with training.

6.0 Summary

Reflecting on the changes within the organisation and membership of Panel, it has been a year of some uncertainty, but regardless of this the Panel has continued to focus on their role and work to a consistently high standard.

The Panel would like to acknowledge the contribution made by all those working with, and caring for our children and young people. Most importantly, the Panel would like to thank foster carers and their families who play such a vital part in children's lives, giving them the opportunity to experience family life and to know they are valued and loved.

Sara E.J Neville

Independent Fostering Panel Chair

1st May 2017

Fostering Panel Statistics - Number of Panels
(table): April 2016 - March 2017

		No. of panels scheduled	No. of panels taken place	Reason for cancellation
2016	April	2	2	
	May	2	2	
	June	3	3	
	July	2	1	not enough panel members to be quorate
	August	3	3	
	September	2	2	
	October	3	2	extra panel was cancelled as no longer needed
	November	3	3	
	December	1	1	
2017	January	2	2	
	February	2	2	
	March	2	2	
	Total	27	25	

Fostering Panel Statistics (pie chart): April 2016 - March 2017

